This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

+ *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.

+ *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.

+ *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.

+ *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at `http://books.google.com/`

1:No subject

dsc

NCW
Rath

TOO MUCH EFFICIENCY

TOO MUCH EFFICIENCY

BY

E. J. RATH

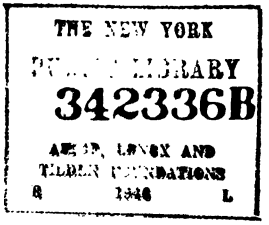
AUTHOR OF
THE NERVOUS WRECK,
SAM, ETC.

C LC

GROSSET & DUNLAP
PUBLISHERS NEW YORK

c1917
TE

COPYRIGHT, 1917, BY
W. J. WATT & COMPANY


THE NEW YORK
PUBLIC LIBRARY
342336B
ASTOR, LENOX AND
TILDEN FOUNDATIONS
R 1946 L

Printed in the United States of America

TO

ROBERT H. DAVIS

WHO FURNISHES MORE INSPIRATION TO AMERICAN
AUTHORS THAN ANY OTHER PERSON
THE AUTHOR KNOWS

Gregory Jan. 23, 1946

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	THE EXPERT	1
II.	"H. HEDGE, E. E."	12
III.	PRELIMINARY SKIRMISHES	27
IV.	A DEFEAT OR TWO	41
V.	MAKING AN IMPRESSION	58
VI.	GRATUITIES, OR ALLOWANCES?	70
VII.	AND DEMOSTHENES	81
VIII.	A QUESTION OF KEYS	91
IX.	BUYING A HAT	101
X.	EFFICIENT DANCING	113
XI.	FRIENDS OF THE FAMILY	127
XII.	THE DECLARATION	137
XIII.	AND ITS RESULTS	147
XIV.	COMPLIMENTS OF THE SEASON	160
XV.	A PROPHYLACTIC PARTY	174
XVI.	THE ELOPEMENT	187
XVII.	DESERTING TO THE ENEMY	195
XVIII.	A DEEP-LAID PLOT	207
XIX.	SOME OUTPOSTS	216
XX.	A MATTER OF COLOR	230
XXI.	A LITTLE LOVE-MAKING	243
XXII.	BURNED BRIDGES	254
XXIII.	SCIENCE VERSUS ——?	265
XXIV.	"E. E." FOR THE LAST TIME	281
XXV.	FATHER RETURNS	296

"Office-boy," said Mr. Sherwood.

"New-fangled business, eh?" observed Mr. Brooke, staring in fascination at the hole in the wall.

"Oh, certainly."

"Bet it cost you a lot of money."

"One thousand, three hundred and twenty-six dollars and forty-eight cents," said Mr. Sherwood briskly, as he blotted a paper and placed it in the jaws of a steel contrivance, from which presently the office-boy removed it. "But for maintenance—well, between eight and nine cents a day. Does the work of three ordinary boys; never gets sick; never sasses the stenographer; never goes to a ball game; never went to its grandmother's funeral."

"Some boy," sighed Mr. Brooke, whose establishment knew none of its kind. "Saves you something, I suppose?"

"Wouldn't have it if it didn't. Saved its cost of installation in a year and a half, and is now several hundred dollars ahead of the game. Never took a vacation yet, or asked for one. Saves time, money, and sorrow."

Mr. Brooke, who was also the president of a corporation, nodded his head solemnly, indicating that there was no use of arguing the matter.

"How much is my bill?" he asked.

" Twenty-two thousand dollars," replied Mr. Sherwood promptly. "Here it is."

"Ouch!"

"Ten per cent. of what we've saved you on a year's operating cost. Is that much?"

"No-o; not when you look at it that way, I suppose."

"You admit the saving, don't you?"

"Got to."

Everybody in the hardware factory over which John W. Brooke presided had to admit it. The things that the Economy and Efficiency Corporation did to that establishment were amazing. The task had been one of several months in performance, and it had been thorough in results.

It did not always appear to be important—but it was. For instance, when the E. and E. folks discovered that one of Mr. Brooke's files, in the process of making, traveled 823 yards, passed through 12 machines, turned 78 corners, and consumed a total of 68 minutes to make the trip, they said, "All wrong." When they got through with that file it was a domesticated instrument. It traveled but 322 yards, went through only 7 machines, turned 27 corners, and did the whole journey in 31 minutes and 22 seconds. The file was just as good in every way as its slow-moving predecessor, for it sold for just as much money and it cost a cent and a half less. John W. Brooke made an appalling number of files.

What E. and E. did to the file it did to almost everything in the Brooke establishment except the office-boys; and Mr. Brooke was now seriously contemplating their downfall, as he watched the silent electric youth remove a handful of letters from the desk of the brunette with the pink cheeks and convey

them to the desk of Mr. Sherwood, with a directness and singleness of purpose that merited loud acclaim.

Mr. Brooke had been a doubter when the Economy and Efficiency folks, inspecting his imposing factory, nonchalantly offered to save him over two hundred thousand dollars a year. In fact, he had laughed scornfully.

He himself had builded the John W. Brooke Hardware and Machine Tool Company, and he thought he ought to know something about his infant industry. But when E. and E. got through Brooke admitted that he was wrong. His baby had ailments of which he never dreamed. The diagnosis made it appear to be a very sick child. He was worried about it.

In his anxiety to see his industrial offspring cured of its troubles and thereby assured of a green old age, Mr. Brooke permitted the E. and E. business surgeons to operate and medicate. Somehow they managed to do it without bringing about a strike, a fire, or an earthquake, to the end that John W. Brooke made more hardware and more money, without reducing the cost to the consumer one red cent—which would have been impossible anyhow, because nobody ever saw a really red cent.

"I'm converted," admitted Mr. Brooke, as he examined the bill. "I've hit the trail. I'll have a check sent this afternoon. I didn't know you knew so much about the hardware business."

"Hardware!" echoed President Sherwood. "Man dear, we won't confine ourselves to hardware. It's our business to know all there is to know about any

business, or if we don't know it to find it out. We haven't failed yet. I'll guarantee to take any old-fashioned business like yours, put it on its feet, and increase its earning capacity in a year."

Mr. Brooke winced at the description of his lusty infant, but made no comment.

"Why, do you realize what we saved the International people on lead pencils? We saved 'em two-fifths of a cent per gross in manufacturing cost!"

"Is that all?" ventured Mr. Brooke in a rash moment.

"All!" Mr. Sherwood's amazement was blazoned on his face. *"All!"* He choked for an instant. "Why, do you know what two-fifths of a cent a gross means to them?"

Mr. Brooke shook his head and awaited the worst with fortitude.

"Merely $68,682.45 a year!" said Mr. Sherwood, without even glancing at a memorandum.

"I'll take your word for it," murmured Mr. Brooke humbly. Then he brightened and there was a glimmer in his eye. "But I have an idea I can name one thing you can't reform."

"Name it!"

The hardware king glanced at the E. and E. potentate with a suspicion of malicious delight and paused in a tantalizing way.

"Give it a name!" demanded Mr. Sherwood impatiently.

"Did you ever try to reform the business of running an American household?"

The question was simple, direct, and apparently innocent; yet it had the effect of plunging the E. and E. president into profound thought; at first he was plainly astonished; then he became studious, preoccupied, and puzzled by turns.

And then, after a full minute of silence, his face lighted with an expression of bravado and defiance. He leaned forward in his chair, shot a glance of challenge into the eyes of the hardware magnate, pounded a fist on the desk, and registered enthusiasm.

"Easy!" he cried. "Easy as a soft hat!"

Mr. Brooke smiled benignantly and sympathetically.

"Ever do it?" he asked.

"No; but what difference does that make?"

"Married?" asked Mr. Brooke.

"No. But—"

"And yet you say you know everything about anything," interrupted Brooke in a tone of pity.

The president of the E. and E. corporation tilted his chin aggressively and poised a finger under the nose of his caller.

"Running a household is a business, isn't it?" he demanded.

"It's not even a recreation," muttered the hardware king. "I imagine, if you run it at all, it's a gift."

"Rot; it's a business! It must be! Everything is a business. Eating is a business; so is sleeping. It's a business when you breathe. It's a business when you talk. Why, *thinking* is a business!"

Mr. Brooke shook his head wearily.

"What's your household investment?" snapped Sherwood suddenly.

"Oh, I don't know. A big bunch of money and three children, I guess."

Sherwood snorted.

"What are the annual expenses?"

"God knows!"

"You mean to say you *don't keep books?*"

"Just pay the bills, that's all."

Mr. Sherwood gasped and turned pale.

"It's unbelievable!" he exclaimed. "A man runs a household and he doesn't even know what it costs! Rotten business! What does it produce?"

"Worry."

"Can you sell that?"

"Can't give it away," sighed Mr. Brooke.

"Amazing!" blurted the E. and E. man. "Never dreamed of such a thing in my life. Why, it's criminal! It's an offense against law and order. Who runs this household of yours?"

"Everybody in it. Connie, mostly; and the servants some."

"Who's Connie?"

"My daughter Constance."

"And there's no system? No accounting?"

"No system I ever discovered, except handing me the bills and telling me to look pleasant."

"And you've never even tried to get at the cost?"

"Oh, I started adding up the check-stubs once, but I got scared," said Mr. Brooke sheepishly. "I had too many other things to think about."

The E. and E. president leaned back in his chair and regarded his caller with pity.

"Worst case I ever heard of," he commented with a shake of his head. "Fierce! What do you propose to do about it?"

"I wasn't figuring to do anything about it. What can I?"

"Everything. You can't go on forever this way. Why, it'll ruin your character if it doesn't bust your bank-account. You've simply got to stop it."

Mr. Brooke made a helpless gesture and recorded a mental note of regret that he had introduced the subject.

"Well, I haven't time to bother about it now. I've got to go away on a trip. Although it does worry me about leaving the youngsters. I'm a widower, you see. Connie is supposed to be the boss home, but—well, it all comes pretty high. I suppose I'll have to stand it."

President Sherwood glared indignantly.

"Stand nothing!" he declared. "When are you going away?"

"I'd get away this afternoon if I could. It's a sudden trip."

"For how long?"

"Haven't figured exactly. I can tell you in a few minutes."

"Never mind now. We'll get to that later. Do you want this household of yours managed while you're away?"

Mr. Brooke looked doubtful.

"And reformed?"

The man who financed the household was curious.

"Reorganized, put on its feet, wastage eliminated, economies effected, efficiency installed, time saved, success assured." Mr. Sherwood rattled it off briskly like a candidate with one speech.

The hardware man was obviously interested and not a little startled. He wrinkled his forehead into vertical folds between the eyes and devoted a few seconds to thought.

"But if you never ran a household," he ventured, "how—"

"I never ran a lead-pencil factory until I saved two-fifths of a cent a gross," interrupted Mr. Sherwood sharply. "I never ran a hardware business until I saved you over two hundred thousand dollars a year. Man, I can run anything!"

Mr. Brooke's eyes betrayed scepticism.

"Anything!" repeated Mr. Sherwood belligerently. "Anything from the war in Europe to shoveling snow. I could run the government if they'd let me."

"A brownstone front and three children are different from all those things," commented Mr. Brooke.

"But the eternal principles of economy and efficiency are immutable," declared Mr. Sherwood, pounding his desk. "They can be applied to anything. This corporation employs experts in every line. I've got a man who can teach a hen how to save time and money laying an egg. Now, while I say I *can* do anything, when it comes to ap-

plying scientific business principles, I'll admit that I never *did* run a household. Just for that very reason, I want to. I'll do it cheap. I'll make you a low rate. I'll guarantee you results—big results."

"Don't tease me," chided Mr. Brooke.

"I'm serious. You've just suggested a field to me that opens wonderful possibilities. Why, I'd almost take the job for nothing; I would, except that it would violate the principles of efficient management."

Mr. Brooke pondered briefly.

"I've a good mind to talk to Connie about it," he said.

"Don't!"

"What do you mean?"

"Don't talk to anybody about it except me. If you get to talking you won't do it. Decide now! The golden chance is right here. You're going away. Fine! That clears the decks for my man. Mr. Brooke, if you'll give my company full authority in this matter, when you return I'll guarantee to turn over to you a household so thoroughly efficient that it'll pay you money to run it. You'll be able to capitalize it and sell the stock."

The hardware magnate hesitated.

"I'm very fond of my children; I guess I'm indulgent," he confessed.

"Indulgent? Does it help your child to be indulgent toward it? You should be kind, of course; reasonable, affectionate, and all that. But indulgence is another thing. How much better if you did not have to be indulgent; how much more satisfactory to have

an efficient, economical child who does not need to be indulged?"

"Big talk," observed Mr. Brooke, shaking his head.

"Big talk means big results with me. This company never fails. It can't, because it simply applies right principles in the right way. What we do is really very simple—when you know how."

"While I wouldn't expect too much," said the hardware man slowly, "it would be a great comfort for me to know, seeing that I'm going away, that things would be in charge of somebody who—"

"I see we are going to do business," interrupted Mr. Sherwood.

"Oh, I didn't say so. But I was just thinking—"

Mr. Brooke faltered and looked guilty.

"We'll get this on paper at once," said the E. and E. president.

He pushed three buttons on the edge of his desk. One operated a silent signal in front of the stenographer with the dark hair and pink cheeks.

She arose quietly and approached with book in hand. The second button caused the immediate appearance of a clerk carrying a set of legal papers. The third button actuated the electric office-boy, who shot noiselessly into the room and came to a stop at Mr. Sherwood's elbow. Mr. Brooke viewed the swift mobilization of forces with a feeling that he was about to take one of the momentous steps of life.

CHAPTER II

"H. HEDGE, E. E."

THE deep-toned clock in the entrance-hall of the Brooke mansion lacked one minute of seven. Horace, the butler, had taken his stand in front of it, watching the great minute-hand crawl slowly along the last stage of its hourly journey. Ere that journey was completed the master of the household would be ringing at the door, probably when fifteen seconds of the hour remained. For Mr. Brooke, being a punctual business man, was an equally punctual father.

There was a faint expression of perplexity and disappointment on the ruddy countenance of Horace when there came a sharp ring at the bell, with fully forty-five seconds of the hour remaining. The butler sensed something unusual. The master was ahead of time; also, there was a note of impatience in his ring. Horace went to the door with an indefinable trepidation of spirit.

It was not John W. Brooke who stood in the vestibule.

The ringer of the bell was a much younger person. He glanced at the butler sharply, then motioned to a large grip that rested beside him.

"Mine," he said briefly. "Take it in, please."

Immediately he stepped past the butler and entered the Brooke mansion.

Horace momentarily forgot the stranger in his contemplation of the grip. Somehow the grip seemed portentous. It signified mystery to the butler. He took a step forward. The Brooke limousine was not at the curb. This was another extraordinary thing. Nor was there the least sign of Mr. Brooke, who should at that instant, according to established order, have been standing in front of the butler, saying, "Good evening, Horace."

With a gasp that was only half suppressed, Horace turned quickly and entered the house, picking up the grip as he did so. The bag was heavy and evidently well filled.

The stranger was standing in the hall, contemplating with plain disfavor a knight in armor, or, rather, a suit of armor that had no knight within. He turned as Horace appeared.

"Where are the children?" he asked.

Horace stared. The familiarity of the question jolted him. He did not know this person who asked for "the children," but he did know that he was an utter stranger to the Brooke mansion.

"Mr. Brooke is not at home yet, sir."

"Certainly not. He won't be. Where are the children?"

The stranger whipped off his overcoat and handed that garment, together with his hat, to Horace, who received them mechanically, after the fashion of an

excellent servant. Yet the butler, for all his outward calm, was an agitated person within. Mr. Brooke would not be there? Extraordinary! Yes, even ominous. Such a thing had never happened before. Where was he?

Horace involuntarily glanced downward at the grip, which he still carried. It was strangely heavy. Could it be possible that his master— Oh, horrors, no!

"The children are in the library, sir—to the right."

The stranger wheeled and walked quickly in the given direction. As he disappeared through the portières Horace was still standing in the hall, clinging to his burden and staring with open mouth.

The library of the Brooke mansion was a very large room, nearly half of the width of the house and more than half its depth. It was a real library; that is, it contained books. Two paces inside the doorway the stranger paused and glanced alertly about him.

Off in the far corner was a young man, yawning over a newspaper. In the embrasure of a window was a half-grown girl, staring idly down at the lawn. Near the center of the room, directly in front of the visitor, sat a young woman, carelessly turning the pages of a magazine.

"Hello, daddy," she said, without looking up. "Just a second and I'll kiss you."

"Very good," said the stranger.

Constance Brooke leaped from her chair with a cry of dismay and confronted a man whom she had never before beheld. The young man came out of the far corner, tossed his newspaper aside and ranged

himself by the side of his sister. The girl in the window turned and stared.

"I—I thought you were my father," stammered Constance, her cheeks red.

"His representative," said the stranger, with a slight bow.

"His rep— Isn't he here? Didn't he come home with you?"

"No; he didn't come home with me. He is not coming home."

"He's hurt!"

"Not at all. He is well. I'll explain. Sit down. Here's my card."

There was something brusque as well as brisk about the stranger. He talked as one with authority. An air of complete confidence fitted him as snugly as his well-cut clothes. His voice was by no means unpleasant, yet it had a certain ring of command that was not grateful to the ear.

"Miss Constance Brooke, I believe?" inquired the stranger, as he produced his card-case.

"Yes—certainly."

"Mr. William Brooke?" glancing at the young man.

That person nodded.

"And Miss Alice?" continued the stranger, with a nod in the direction of the young girl, who had now joined the group.

"Yes; my sister," supplied the elder girl.

The stranger took a step forward and presented a small bit of pasteboard. The three Brooke children, their heads close together, read:

H. HEDGE, E. E.

Then they looked up at the stranger. He was unfolding a document of foolscap size. In the lower left-hand corner they glimpsed a large red seal. The stranger began to read:

"I, John W. Brooke, during the period of my absence from home, do hereby appoint and constitute as head of my domestic household one Henry Hedge, the bearer of this document, upon whom I confer full authority to manage said household in every respect, to care for it, maintain it, guard it, and in every manner provide for its needs and its security. I do designate the said Henry Hedge as the personal guardian of my children, William W., Constance T., and Alice, and I confer upon him, during my absence, all such authority as I possess concerning them. I hereby charge my said children to obey the said Henry Hedge in all things, and to accord to him that respect to which he, as their guardian, is by right entitled. And I do charge my servants, now in my employ or who may hereafter be in my employ, to obey the said Henry Hedge, so long as this document shall be of force and effect. And I declare that this document and its possession by the said Henry Hedge shall constitute full and ample warrant of authority for him to act as I have above charged.

"(Signed) JOHN W. BROOKE."

The three Brooke children spoke not a word. They simply stared at Henry Hedge, as though fascinated by some strange spectacle. He turned the face of the document toward them and exhibited the bold signature they knew so well. There was no mistaking the handwriting of John W. Brooke. Vaguely they observed the names of two persons designated as witnesses, and a third name which was that of a notary.

But the thing that riveted their glances was the great seal. It stared out at them from the white paper like an unblinking and menacing red eye, glowering at them.

Mr. Hedge produced another document, of a less threatening aspect, and this he also read, in a calm but incisive tone:

"MY DEAR CHILDREN:

"I shall be away from home until the evening of February 19. I am in perfect health. My trip is chiefly of a business nature. In order to make all proper provision for your care and comfort, I am placing a personal representative in charge of my household, a man in whom I have complete confidence. My personal attorneys are charged to communicate with me in case of emergency, but under no other circumstances. It will be useless for you to inquire my whereabouts from them. I feel that this short separation will be of benefit to all of us, and I shall look forward to our reunion with affectionate anticipations.

"In the meanwhile Mr. Hedge will be in full and absolute charge, with the authority that I have conferred upon him in another document. He is a man of excellent character, thoroughly recommended by his employers, and, I am satisfactorily assured, a gentleman. He will reside with you, and will have full financial responsibility in all household and family matters.

"It is needless for me to say that you will co-operate with him in every way; I know that you will. *Treat him as you would me.*

"And now, my children, I bid you, for a short time, an affectionate good-bye.

"Your loving father,
"JOHN W. BROOKE."

"That document you may keep," said Mr. Hedge, as he passed the letter to Constance Brooke. The one with the red seal he replaced in his pocket.

Still the three Brooke children spoke no word.

Speech was not theirs for the moment; rather, it was theirs to gaze in mute bewilderment at the bearer of the documents.

They saw a person who was somewhat above medium height and of slender frame. The lines of his head were angular, an effect heightened by his almost black hair and the stiff, uncompromising manner in which it was brushed straight back past his ears. His eyes were dark and disconcertingly steady. His nose was long, but straight in the bridge and not badly molded. His lips closed firmly, but not harshly. There was a faint cleft in his chin. He was dressed quietly, but obviously well. As to his age, it was probably twenty-eight or nine.

Mr. Hedge bore the scrutiny with composure, as though it were something he had quite anticipated. He measured glances with William Brooke without the quiver of an eyelid, while he regarded Constance as impersonally as though she were an inanimate fixture in the library.

It was Alice who spoke first.

"Where is my father?" she demanded, in a frightened voice. "I—I don't understand. Where is dad?"

"I am unable to answer," replied Mr. Hedge easily. "I do not know. It is not my business to know. He is, however, as he explains in his letter, quite well and he will return to you on the day mentioned."

"February 19!" gasped Constance, glancing at the letter. "And—and this is December! You mean to say we will not see our father in all *that* time?"

"Evidently not, unless he should change his plans."

"But what will we *do?*"

"Continue to reside in your home under my protection," observed Mr. Hedge, with a casual glance that embraced the principal features of the apartment.

The scion of the Brooke family, after gulping twice, found his voice.

"What sort of a joke is all this?" he demanded.

"No joke. Business," said Mr. Hedge tersely.

"Well, I propose to find out."

"Very well. Too late this evening, however. To-morrow you may telephone to the offices of our corporation and obtain a verification."

"But what's the idea of it all? If the old man wants to go away, well and good. But why can't *we* run things? Where do you come in?"

Mr. Hedge smiled faintly, a dignified yet not unpleasant proceeding.

"I came in by order of your father," he answered. "In fact, for the time being, I *am* your father."

"Good Lord!" The exclamation came from the lips of Billy Brooke. He surveyed the stranger from head to heels with plain intent to express contempt. Why, he was bigger himself!

"I prefer, however, to be called Mr. Hedge. And the reason that you cannot run things is that *I* am going to run them."

There was a snap in his voice that made the Brooke children wince.

"And now," he added, in a more comfortable tone, "I believe it is time for dinner. Let us go in."

Constance hesitated, which meant that her brother

and sister did likewise. It was a characteristic development of every crisis in the Brooke family. They would have scorned to acknowledge it, but the older brother and the younger sister had unconsciously fallen into the habit of waiting to see what Constance would do. Mr. Hedge sensed the situation. He had eyes only for the central figure of the trio.

She met his glance quite steadily, with a slight narrowing of her eyes, as though making a swift mental calculation. Her poise had returned to her; even at the first she had not been frightened, although undeniably startled.

Constance was not so pretty as her fifteen-year-old sister; that would have been difficult, for Alice was pretty beyond all reason. None the less, the young chatelaine of the Brooke mansion presented to the world a countenance of which only the most exacting could make complaint. It was the kind that photographs with mysterious effect, because it held something more than mere comeliness, something elusive yet discernible, something that, for want of a more successful description, is usually called character.

John W. Brooke always insisted that Constance was her mother, over again. Yet sometimes he saw himself in the straightforward glance of her gray eyes, and others saw it, too. Mr. Hedge did not see it, because he had never beheld John W. Brooke. Nevertheless, he saw enough to convince him that he had made no mistake in addressing himself chiefly to the young woman who stood before him.

"Certainly; we will dine," said Constance abruptly.

She led the way from the library, down the broad hall and into a spacious room that lay on the opposite side of the house. Alice followed her closely, then Billy. Mr. Hedge brought up in the rear, making swift note of his surroundings and occasionally frowning slightly.

The dining-room in the Brooke mansion was all that a Fifth Avenue dining-room should be. It was almost a banquet hall. Mr. Brooke had paneled it in a walnut, because he could easily afford to; he had placed no check upon his architect, either in this or any other apartment under his roof.

The family table, always employed when there were no guests, seemed absurdly small in the great room. It was not placed in the center, but drawn close to an open fireplace, wherein a few logs of high-priced driftwood were burning with strange flames of green and blue and yellow.

It was quite a long walk to the table, and the procession moved in single file, Mr. Hedge's active glance flitting from side to side. Even Horace, the butler, from his place behind Constance's chair, could discern that the stranger was completely at ease. He neither hurried nor loitered; he did not carry his hands in his pockets, nor rub his nose furtively, nor straighten his tie. He moved as nonchalantly toward the table as John W. Brooke himself.

"My father's chair," said Constance with a brief gesture.

Mr. Hedge seated himself in it.

"You may serve dinner, Horace," murmured Constance.

"Yes, Miss Brooke," and Horace, wrenching his glance from the face of the stranger, disappeared on his errand.

There was half a minute of silence, broken only by an embarrassed cough from Billy. Then Mr. Hedge spoke.

"Now that we've all plunged in, the water isn't so cold, after all, is it?"

The three Brookes looked at him sharply and with obviously surprised faces. Constance and her brother exchanged fleeting glances. Alice pursed her lips. The observation had sounded rather human, quite different from the Hedge of the library. He was smiling, too.

"You see," he continued easily, "the first shock was not in the fact that I arrived on the scene, but in the fact that your father didn't."

Constance was not wholly sure of this.

"I can readily understand your surprise," said Mr. Hedge. "It is entirely natural. We are all more or less creatures of surprise. But surprises are not necessarily unpleasant or attended by any unfortunate consequences."

Constance made a note of the fact that the stranger thought well of himself.

"I'm simply your father's agent for a short time. I've no doubt in the world that you will all take a keen interest in the experiment, as soon as the nature of it is clear to you."

Experiment! The Brookes looked interested. What sort of an experiment?

But if Mr. Hedge was aware of the interest he did not at that time gratify curiosity. Instead, he branched off into things that were quite irrelevant, things that ordinary folks talk about. He was a rather good talker, yet he did not do all the talking. He managed to lead the Brookes into it, and presently they found themselves conversing with this strange person as though he were actually a familiar member of the household.

Still mystified beyond measure at the extraordinary disappearance of Brooke, senior, the younger Brookes, with the inevitable viewpoint of youth, did not fail to perceive the element of adventure.

They were still shocked, but no longer alarmed. The appeal of novelty was not lost upon them. Perhaps it was really a joke, after all; perhaps Father Brooke was hiding behind the door, laughing at them and ready to pop into the room as a hilarious climax. As for Hedge himself, even Constance, who had a well-developed streak of caution, was beginning to admit that he might not prove so utterly impossible as his abrupt introduction had presaged. More than once Alice found herself laughing at his remarks.

Dinner was proceeding with astonishing ease. Billy had thawed to the point where he took up his favorite amusement of teasing his sisters.

"By the way, Connie," he asked, "have you dad's letter there?"

She produced the letter, and her brother read it with solemn face.

"Down here it says, 'Treat him as you would me,' " quoted Billy.

There was a look of quiet amusement on Hedge's face.

"Well, why don't you, Connie?" demanded her brother.

"I—I don't quite understand," she stammered.

There was a flush on her cheeks, partly anger, partly confusion. Something was coming, she knew; she could have annihilated her brother.

"Don't understand?" echoed the demon. "Well, you know how you always treated father when he sat down at the table."

Constance was blushing furiously. Of course she knew! It was her invariable custom to kiss John W. Brooke on top of his expansive bald head. She blushed at the memory of this, and she blushed anew at the memory of her salutation to Hedge, back in the library, when, before she had glanced up from her magazine, she thought he was her father.

For an instant she contemplated flight. She dared not look across the table, where sat the person who was to be treated according to the injunction of her father. Alice suppressed a giggle; Billy was grinning. If Hedge was laughing, she would die.

But Hedge was not laughing. He did not appear to be conscious of the dire confusion of Constance. Instead, he was regarding the butler with a cold glare.

"Come here!" he commanded, raising an imperative finger.

The butler approached.

"Your name's Horace, isn't it?"

"Why—yes, sir."

"Then listen, Horace. I've been watching you. Do you realize that you waste from thirty-five to forty per cent. of energy every time you walk from that door to the table?"

The voice of Hedge was rasping. Horace's lower jaw sagged slowly.

"In the first place," continued Hedge, emphasizing his remarks with incisive gestures, "you take a longer route than is necessary. Take a direct route—so—and you save three steps. Lengthen your stride and you save two additional steps. Let me see you step out. There! You see it can be done. There are two equally short routes by which the table may be approached. Alternate them. It saves the rugs. Walk faster. It saves time. And turn down those lights along the wall. They're unnecessary and it will save electricity. After this evening, put only one log on the fire. It saves wood. That will do."

If the butler was frozen into an image of blank amazement, the same was equally true of the Brookes. They sat rigid in their chairs, staring at H. Hedge. Vanished was the agonizing confusion of Constance; vanished the diabolical glee of her brother and sister. No emotion touched them save that of superlative astonishment.

It remained for Billy to recover speech.

"What—what the blazes do you call that?" he demanded.

"That," said Hedge, quietly, "is a kindergarten lesson in efficiency."

"You mean that you are going to try—"

"Young man, you are beginning to get the framework of an idea."

CHAPTER III

PRELIMINARY SKIRMISHES

THERE was an instant of silence in the dining-room, while Hedge placidly stirred his coffee. His amazing outbreak over the inefficiency of Horace subsided as rapidly as it arose. He had relapsed into a satisfied calm.

"Are we to understand," began Constance, coldly, "that our father told you—"

"Your father told me nothing. I have never seen him."

"Never saw him! Yet you mean to say that he sent you here?"

"He made full arrangements with the company of which I am a representative," replied Mr. Hedge. "The Economy and Efficiency Corporation, Limited. We have recently effected a reorganization of his business. We have, in his absence, now been placed in charge of his household."

"And you actually propose to *live* here?"

The tone of Constance was scornful and it was not belied by the look in her gray eyes.

"I *am* living here," responded Mr. Hedge, sipping his coffee. "You must learn to separate a fact from

a mere intention. My immediate personal effects I brought with me. My trunk will be here in the morning. By the way, Horace, did you take my grip to Mr. Brooke's room?"

The butler shook his head; speech had not yet returned to him.

"Do so at once or cause it to be done. I shall occupy Mr. Brooke's suite."

Horace glanced at Constance and hesitated. He received no sign that would serve as a guide to action, and presently disappeared from the room, his head wagging pitifully.

Constance bit her lips.

"May I venture to ask your plans?" she inquired.

"Certainly. They are simple. To make it brief, my plans are to put your father's household on an economic basis that will correspond to that on which his hardware establishment is now operated. I may say that these plans are also his, but the accomplishment of them has been turned over entirely to me. I shall, of course, expect your coöperation."

"And if we should decline to coöperate?"

"That is an impossible contingency."

Constance and her brother exchanged glances, and both of them looked at Alice. Here was a fool who had rushed in where an angel feared to tread; where even John W. Brooke, hardware magnate, often walked with circumspection.

"When I say that I expect your coöperation," continued Mr. Hedge in a less formal tone, "I may say that I can easily show you why we should coöperate.

The science of eliminating waste and installing efficiency is a fascinating one. It possesses strong elements of romance."

Alice's eyes wore a hypnotic stare.

"Your father, although an unbeliever, recently became interested in it. I may now say that he is a strong advocate. His business has been completely reformed."

"Was there anything the matter with it?" demanded Billy.

"Over two hundred thousand dollars' worth of annual waste," said Mr. Hedge promptly. "We do not know, unfortunately, the annual waste of his household, but I understand that no accounting has been kept. However, that will be remedied. I should judge, from a very casual inspection, that anything up to a fifty per cent. saving may be achieved. In any event, the work will be one of great interest."

The son of the household had an angry exclamation on his lips, but Constance checked him with a sign. She was thinking rapidly. Instinctively she felt that the time was one for caution.

If there was to be a battle, it would be necessary to make the customary reconnaissances. She had carried with her the tiny bit of pasteboard which the visitor handed her in the library; now she picked it up from the table and glanced at it idly. It was merely a play for time, but the successor of John W. Brooke was prompt in turning the trifling incident to account.

"If you will note my card," he said, "you will see

that it is about one-half the area of the customary business card. That saves paper. You will note that there is no superfluous 'Mr.' and that the Christian name is represented by an initial. That saves ink and type. A similar saving is represented by the letters 'E. E.,' which serve adequately to designate the nature of my business. The entire card is supplied at a forty-two-per-cent. reduction over the cost of the average business card. The matter may seem trifling; in reality, it is important. It is a primary step in scientific management."

"But what does E. E. mean?" asked Constance, studying the penurious scrap of pasteboard.

"Efficiency Engineer."

"It would seem," she observed critically, "that your card requires a verbal explanation."

"Possibly—to the uninformed," replied Mr. Hedge. "Even so, conversation is cheaper than paper and ink. You now understand what E. E. means; it will never be necessary for you to inquire again during the period of your natural life. But in the same period, if it were necessary to print 'Efficiency Engineer' in full on all similar cards, the expense in paper and ink would doubtless run into thousands of dollars, to say nothing of the time and cost of composition. It would be an economic fallacy."

There was an unmistakable note of enthusiasm in the voice of Mr. Hedge.

"And the 'H.' instead of your first name—is that also an economy?" asked Constance.

"Assuredly."

"But there must be other 'H. Hedges' in the world, even in the city. It would seem very easy to get you mixed up."

"Theoretically, yes. Practically, no. Take your own case. Your name, I believe, is Constance T. Brooke. I care not what the middle name may be; it is superfluous and wasteful in any event. We will throw out the 'T.' to begin with. We will now assume that your card is printed 'C. Brooke.'"

"Engraved," amended Constance.

"Printed," said Mr. Hedge. "Engraving costs from three to four times as much. However, you are 'C. Brooke.' Now, you suggest that that is not sufficient identification. I insist that, for your purposes, it is. In the first place, nearly all persons to whom you distribute this card, owing to a silly social custom, are quite aware of your identity. In the second place, there is no other 'C. Brooke' residing at this number on Fifth Avenue. In the third place, I venture to say that not in all the circle of your acquaintance is there another C. Brooke with whom you could possibly be confused. There may be other C. Brookes in the world. Yet I should estimate, offhand, that your chances of being confused with one are about one in three or four million. So you see that practice and theory are not always in accord. Take my advice and leave the 'e' off the Brooke. It is cumbersome, unnecessary, and silent. If you use it you ought to pronounce it. Otherwise it is alphabetic extravagance."

Mr. Hedge smiled gently and evidently awaited a

refutation of his statement. There was none from Constance; she was annoyed and angry.

"That being the case," she said, controlling her voice, "why not leave the final 'e' off 'Hedge'?"

The substitute father studied her with quick interest.

"You are an apt pupil," he said. "The suggestion is excellent. When it is necessary for me to obtain new cards I shall do so. Thank you."

Somehow Constance did not feel that she had achieved an effective retort. She did not want to be an apt pupil; she did not in the least intend to be of any assistance in promoting economy and efficiency.

Mr. Hedge sought to pursue his advantage.

"You children must understand," he said in a friendly tone, "that while I have certain fixed ideas and standards, and that while my profession proceeds along certain well-defined lines, it is not necessarily a complete science. I shall always be glad to receive suggestions, provided that they conform to the general theory and principles of scientific management. I want you to feel free to come to me at any time on such matters.

"And in all matters, so far as that is concerned, I expect, of course, that you children will make me your confidant and adviser."

"You children!" The expression caused the three Brookes to writhe in their chairs. Why, this interloper was scarcely older than Billy Brooke!

To disguise his confusion the latter person lighted

a cigarette. Unknown to Billy, Hedge was watching the proceeding narrowly.

"Will you kindly explain to me," he said suddenly, "why you wave a match eight times in order to extinguish it?"

Billy gaped at him.

"You waved it eight times—so," declared Hedge, illustrating. "Waste energy. An unnecessary physical effort that might better be employed. I extinguish a match—so."

He lighted one, waited until the flame had firmly caught the wood, then held it a few inches from his lips and puffed gently.

"Waste of wind!" exclaimed Billy triumphantly.

"Not at all. It was necessary for me to expel my breath. I merely took advantage of an inevitable by-product."

The Hedge person was thus far impervious. He had an annoying faculty of turning a thrust to his own advantage.

"Now, as to this room," he remarked, glancing about. "I take it that, under normal conditions, it is utilized but three times a day, during meals, and then only by four persons."

"Sometimes three," amended Constance. "Father is never home at luncheon."

"Exactly," nodded Hedge; "and the room is large enough for forty, instead of four persons. It represents an intolerable waste—an investment which yields no return."

"What would you suggest?" inquired Billy rigidly.

"It is a problem I shall study. I merely call your attention to it as an evidence of unscientific extravagance. It represents an idea that I want you to think about."

Alice brightened.

"We might take boarders," she said.

There was an awful silence, during which Constance and Billy eyed their substitute father furtively. But again he was impervious, although this time he did not twist the suggestion into a text for a lecture. He ignored it. Glancing at his watch with a quick movement, he looked across the table at Constance.

"We will rise, if you please," he said.

The Brookes rose mechanically, as though it were quite useless to offer resistance. Besides, dinner was over.

"I should like to examine the other apartments on this floor," announced Hedge.

Constance, naturally assuming the lead, headed the procession out of the dining-room. She touched a button at the entrance to an apartment across the hall from the library and flooded it with light. The efficiency man examined its rich furniture critically.

From a pocket he had produced a small note-book and pencil in which he proceeded to make a few brief entries.

"What do you call this room?" he asked.

"Nothing particular," answered Constance; "it is used to receive guests, occasionally for dances or other entertainments."

"Parlor," observed Hedge, making a note.

"It is not a parlor," retorted Constance coldly. "Parlors are vulgar."

Nevertheless, the maker of notes made no erasure. Instead he stepped across the room and paused on the threshold of a smaller apartment.

"A music-room," explained Constance. "Beyond is a conservatory."

Mr. Hedge made additional notes.

"I wish to see the library again," he said.

The procession retraced its steps, Mr. Hedge pausing at the hallway to extinguish the lights.

"It is customary to leave them burning," said Constance.

"Evidently." But he did not turn them on again.

The library, that apartment into which the efficiency man had made his original entrance, afforded him an extended opportunity for study. He inspected it more minutely than the rooms on the other side of the hall. He walked from end to end and side to side, stopping occasionally to examine a shelf of books.

He took note of the great table in the center and of two writing-desks that stood near a window.

He observed with a slight frown an innumerable number of electric bulbs, all glowing softly through their translucent glass. Several of them he turned out as he passed.

A Circassian-walnut phonograph arrested his attention.

"It plays tunes," explained Alice sweetly.

"You have music here?" asked Mr. Hedge.

"When we desire it," replied Constance.

"And in the music-room also?"

"Certainly. I also have a piano upstairs."

He made another note.

"I suppose that's too much music," growled Billy, with a glance at his sisters.

"Exactly," said Mr. Hedge evenly.

He continued his exploration and presently arrived at a small button, let into the wall.

"What is that for?" he inquired.

"It calls the butler."

The efficiency man pressed it, then took out his watch and kept his eye on the dial. He looked up as Horace entered the library and stood at attention.

"Thirty-two seconds," he observed. "Where did you come from, Horace?"

"I was in the dining-room, sir."

"A distance of some twenty or twenty-five yards. You occupied thirty-two seconds in walking that distance. Now, while I do not require you to run, hereafter I shall expect you to cut your time in half. That will allow you sixteen seconds—ample. Please call the other servants and have them all report to me here at once."

It was a wide-eyed company that faced the efficiency man, with Horace standing a little in advance and at one side, like a non-commissioned officer. They stared at the stranger with frank wonder written on their faces.

"All here?" asked Hedge with faint sarcasm.

There were eight in line.

"My own maid is away for the evening," said Constance.

"Very well; who are the others, if you please?"

"Horace, the butler, you know," began Constance, after a rebellious instant of hesitation. "Next to him is Mary, the cook; next to her, Elvira, the second cook; the next is Frank, the chauffeur; next are Minnie and Ruth, housemaids; next to Ruth is Fanny, the laundress. The one on the end is Giovanni, the furnace man."

Giovanni glowered as his name went down in the little book.

"This completes the list, then?" asked Mr. Hedge.

"I forgot; there is another," said Constance, counting. "George, the footman."

"He had an evening off, miss," explained Horace quickly.

"We will do without him for the present," said the efficiency man as he reached into his pocket and drew forth a document that was already ominously familiar to the three Brookes. "You will now give me your close attention."

Raising his voice slightly, he proceeded once more to read aloud that extraordinary instrument which began, "I, John W. Brooke," after the fashion of a last will and testament. He read slowly and clearly, pausing between phrases, in order that a full comprehension of his words might be obtained. When he reached the red seal, he looked up and folded the paper.

It was not properly a battle of eyes, for the fire of combat lay only in those of the girl. The eyes of the efficiency man were merely placid, although they were singularly steady. It was like trying to stare the Sphinx out of countenance, and Constance soon abandoned the task.

"I shall join my sister," she said. "You—you are a boor."

"As you wish," he said pleasantly, "although I should not have asked you to retire until eleven o'clock, as you are obviously several years older than your sister. And I am not a boor; I am simply an efficiency engineer. Good night."

Constance did not answer him. She walked from the library, her shoulders squared, her head erect, her steps measured and deliberate. But when she had turned into the hall, beyond the sight of H. Hedge, she ran.

CHAPTER IV

A DEFEAT OR TWO

H. HEDGE had been sitting at the library-table for an hour and a half before any member of the family appeared. He was busy examining, assorting, and piling an array of books and documents. Seven o'clock had found him there, when daylight was still so wan and feeble that he needed the assistance of an electric bulb. He was beginning to get hungry.

Alice was first to observe him. She walked briskly into the room, humming, stopped short and saw the efficiency man. It was such an aggressively cheerful morning, with sunlight now streaming through the broad windows, that Alice, in buoyant response to the mood of the day, had utterly forgotten the presence of this creature under the Brooke rooftree.

The tune died in a dismal little wail. She wheeled sharply and disappeared into the hall. It would have been quite proper if a great cloud had covered the face of the sun at the same instant; although, as it chanced, none did.

Constance appeared five minutes later, but with no evidence of the surprise displayed by her sister.

"Good morning," said Hedge, rising. He nodded and smiled in perfect friendliness. There was not the

least suggestion in his manner or voice that betrayed memory of having been described as a boor.

"Good morning," replied Constance crisply.

She hesitated for an instant, then approached the desk and stood facing him, across the broad mahogany expanse.

"Breakfast is ready now," she said.

"Very good. We will go in."

"Before we do, I wish to say one thing, Mr. Hedge." She spoke with composure.

He nodded.

"There is one fixed rule in our house, which I must ask you to observe. No matter what has happened the evening before, or the day before, or even a minute before, nobody is permitted to be disagreeable at breakfast. My father has always insisted on this and it has become our custom. This, so far as possible, is applied to all meals; in the case of breakfast, invariably. May I ask you not to—to—"

"Not to break it?" he supplied with a smile. "Certainly. I'll observe the rule. It's a good one."

"Thank you," said Constance gravely. "Of course, after breakfast—"

She ended the sentence with a shrug that was noncommittal.

"Oh, of course," he responded nonchalantly.

Constance led the way into the dining-room. Billy and Alice were at the table, the latter half-choked with laughter over something her brother had said.

"Good morning," nodded Billy cheerfully, glancing up.

"Good morning," said Alice, as though she were beholding the efficiency man for the first time that day. She was still laughing.

"Good morning," said Hedge cordially, and he sat down.

Constance breathed a faint sigh of relief. One tradition of the Brooke family thus far remained unshattered.

"Well, Connie, have you treated him as you would father?" demanded her brother with a grin.

The magic influence of the breakfast hour still resisted shock. Constance neither blushed nor frowned. She laughed heartily. H. Hedge did likewise, but with a little wrinkle of perplexity between his eyes.

"If there is anything I am missing," he remarked, "I leave it to your sense of fair play to see that I get it."

Alice whooped. Billy, with an air of grave inquiry, stood up and gazed fixedly at the top of the efficiency man's head. The heavy thatch of dark hair caused him to groan regretfully.

"No; you can't get it—not the way father does," he said sadly.

"That's too bad; if there's anything I can do—"

Alice whooped again.

"You—you might live to be fifty or sixty or seventy or eighty years old," she said, "and then maybe you'd be—"

"Alice! Fair play, now," continued Constance.

"Oh, well, if he doesn't want to wait that long, he could—"

Constance reached across the table and laid her hand across her sister's lips.

"Imp!" she said severely. "Don't spoil it. Besides, I'm not the only one, you know."

"Pooh! I'm not afraid," said Alice. "You lead on and watch me."

"Evidently," sighed the efficiency man, "I am not to be treated as father is. Whatever ought to be coming to me, I am not going to get—yet."

Billy looked at Hedge with a sudden air of interest and then beamed upon Constance.

"Did you get that 'yet' stuff, Connie?"

Constance, however, was very busy with an orange, if a trifle flushed. She pretended not to hear. Alice was happy beyond speech; she gurgled her joy. Billy seemed to be contemplating another attack. It was the efficiency man who broke up the situation.

"If you don't mind," he said plaintively, "let's consider the matter of buttons."

"Buttons?"

The three Brookes made the echo in unison.

"Yes—buttons."

"Buttons?" repeated Billy gravely.

"Buttons?" mused Alice, wrinkling her forehead.

"What kind of buttons?" asked Constance.

"Important buttons," said the efficiency man.

"You mean—"

"Vital buttons," he added, helping himself to a chop.

The Brookes were regarding him with undisguised curiosity.

"The matter of buttons," he said, in a preoccupied tone, "and also the problem of attaching them—"

The efficiency man left the sentence unfinished and emerged abruptly from his preoccupation. He had been almost frivolous; rather deliberately so, yet in evident conscientious accord with the breakfast rule that Constance had laid down. But the frivolity died from his eyes as they widened into a hard stare.

He was looking at something that Horace had placed before him.

"Come here, Horace," he commanded sharply.

Horace returned, walking circumspectly and scientifically.

"What are those things?" demanded H. Hedge.

"Strawberries, sir."

"Strawberries!"

"They're great," volunteered Billy. "Try 'em."

The efficiency man ignored the invitation.

"What month is this, Horace?" he asked sternly.

"December, sir."

"You buy strawberries in *December?*"

"Often; yes, sir."

"Is that true, Miss Brooke?"

"Certainly," she replied, somewhat sharply. "Why not?"

"How much did these strawberries cost?"

"I think they're a dollar and a half a box, now, sir," ventured Horace.

"Well, by the great god of extravagance!" exclaimed H. Hedge, pushing back his chair and staring

once again at the Lucullian dish. "How many boxes?"

"There were three delivered, sir."

"Four dollars and a half for strawberries—in December! Why, that's enough money to buy breakfast in this household for a week! Listen, Horace."

"Yes, sir."

"No more strawberries!"

Horace looked doubtfully at his mistress. She was flushing, angrily now, where a few minutes before it had been a token of confusion.

"We are permitted," she said coldly, "to eat what food we prefer. If you do not like strawberries, Mr. Hedge, you need not eat them. Horace, you may bring an orange for Mr. Hedge."

The efficiency man held up his hand for silence.

"Hereafter you will eat what food I order," he said distinctly. "This—" and he pointed at his dish of strawberries—"is the most wanton waste that I have yet witnessed. I sincerely trust it is not typical."

"Oh, but it is," remarked Billy cheerfully.

"So much the worse, then. No more strawberries will be purchased for this house until strawberries are in season. Strawberries—in December!"

Constance's eyes were snapping. "We will have them whenever we want them," she declared vehemently.

"Not on the house," said H. Hedge. "Not on your father's bank-account. You may have oranges, apples, or prunes until further orders."

"Prunes!" shrieked Alice.

"Prunes," he reiterated. "California prunes."

"I never eat prunes."

"Begin, then. They are excellent, healthful and economical."

"I won't."

"Very well. Apples or oranges, then. Both are nutritious. But I want you to remember that the time when this household helps to support a high-priced hot-house has expired."

The three Brookes exchanged glances.

"Horace," said Constance, "you will order and serve strawberries to-morrow morning."

"Horace," said the efficiency man, in equally calm tones, "if you order and serve strawberries to-morrow morning you will pay for them out of your own pocket, after which you will be fired."

Horace looked appealingly at his mistress. She bit her lip, but made no further remark.

So ended the fixed rule for a gay breakfast. H. Hedge had irrevocably smashed it. The three Brookes gave him a silence for the remainder of the meal. It was poor revenge, perhaps, but they were in no mood for speech. It cheered them none to observe that the efficiency man ate the strawberries.

Out in the hall an immaculately garbed maid, Matilda, stood holding Alice's hat and coat and a bundle of school-books.

"Hurry, now, Alice; you're late again," chided Constance. "The car has been waiting ten minutes."

Alice flung herself carelessly into a garment of fur, jammed a rakish little hat over her ruddy hair, seized

her books and raced toward the door. It was swung open for her by Horace, the butler. Down the front steps of the Brooke mansion she leaped, three at a time, crossed the pavement in two bounds, and plunged through the open doorway of a massive limousine. A footman closed the door after her, then swung himself into the seat beside the chauffeur. A second later the fifteen-thousand-dollar English motor-car was rolling impressively up the avenue.

Hedge had followed as far as the front door and saw it all. He watched until the car disappeared around a corner, then returned to where Constance and Billy were still standing.

"Does it take four persons to send Alice to school?" he inquired briskly.

"Sometimes six or seven," remarked Billy carelessly. "Any objection?"

Hedge ignored the poorly disguised contempt of the inquiry with which Billy tipped his answer.

"Now I desire to see you and your sister in the library," he said, and led the way.

Constance whispered to her brother, motioned him to follow the efficiency man, and then hurried upstairs to the telephone in her boudoir.

Mr. Hedge displayed a surprising amount of patience when, after ten minutes, Constance had not made her appearance in the library. If he felt any annoyance he concealed it. He devoted the interval of the work of examining a pile of papers on the center-table. Billy Brooke had settled back in a great

was making diagrams, doing sums in arithmetic, and writing memoranda, all on the same sheet of paper, and he was intensely absorbed in his work.

Half an hour of silence ensued in the library, and then the efficiency man looked up suddenly and consulted the reading of a large clock that stood in a corner.

"Alice!"

The younger of the Brooke girls could scarcely believe her ears. She looked up from her chair and stared at him.

"How old are you?" he asked abruptly.

Alice gasped and turned pink. She rose to her feet and stood quivering. It was outrageous! Constance walked quickly to her, placed an arm about her shoulders, and then directed a look of scorn into the eyes of the questioner.

"By what right you ask I do not know," she said coldly. "It is easier, however, to answer the question than to argue. Alice is fifteen."

"That being the case, and the hour now being ten o'clock," remarked H. Hedge, "Alice will kindly go to bed."

For an irresolute moment Alice stood glaring at him, her pink cheeks turning rosier each second. Then, when the tears brimmed over, she turned and fled from the room.

"This," said Constance, "is shameless!"

"On the contrary, it is common sense," returned the efficiency man unemotionally, as he studied Constance with a contemplative gaze.

It was not properly a battle of eyes, for the fire of combat lay only in those of the girl. The eyes of the efficiency man were merely placid, although they were singularly steady. It was like trying to stare the Sphinx out of countenance, and Constance soon abandoned the task.

"I shall join my sister," she said. "You—you are a boor."

"As you wish," he said pleasantly, "although I should not have asked you to retire until eleven o'clock, as you are obviously several years older than your sister. And I am not a boor; I am simply an efficiency engineer. Good night."

Constance did not answer him. She walked from the library, her shoulders squared, her head erect, her steps measured and deliberate. But when she had turned into the hall, beyond the sight of H. Hedge, she ran.

CHAPTER IV

A DEFEAT OR TWO

H. HEDGE had been sitting at the library-table for an hour and a half before any member of the family appeared. He was busy examining, assorting, and piling an array of books and documents. Seven o'clock had found him there, when daylight was still so wan and feeble that he needed the assistance of an electric bulb. He was beginning to get hungry.

Alice was first to observe him. She walked briskly into the room, humming, stopped short and saw the efficiency man. It was such an aggressively cheerful morning, with sunlight now streaming through the broad windows, that Alice, in buoyant response to the mood of the day, had utterly forgotten the presence of this creature under the Brooke rooftree.

The tune died in a dismal little wail. She wheeled sharply and disappeared into the hall. It would have been quite proper if a great cloud had covered the face of the sun at the same instant; although, as it chanced, none did.

Constance appeared five minutes later, but with no evidence of the surprise displayed by her sister.

"Good morning," said Hedge, rising. He nodded and smiled in perfect friendliness. There was not the

least suggestion in his manner or voice that betrayed memory of having been described as a boor.

"Good morning," replied Constance crisply.

She hesitated for an instant, then approached the desk and stood facing him, across the broad mahogany expanse.

"Breakfast is ready now," she said.

"Very good. We will go in."

"Before we do, I wish to say one thing, Mr. Hedge." She spoke with composure.

He nodded.

"There is one fixed rule in our house, which I must ask you to observe. No matter what has happened the evening before, or the day before, or even a minute before, nobody is permitted to be disagreeable at breakfast. My father has always insisted on this and it has become our custom. This, so far as possible, is applied to all meals; in the case of breakfast, invariably. May I ask you not to—to—"

"Not to break it?" he supplied with a smile. "Certainly. I'll observe the rule. It's a good one."

"Thank you," said Constance gravely. "Of course, after breakfast—"

She ended the sentence with a shrug that was noncommittal.

"Oh, of course," he responded nonchalantly.

Constance led the way into the dining-room. Billy and Alice were at the table, the latter half-choked with laughter over something her brother had said.

"Good morning," nodded Billy cheerfully, glancing up.

"Good morning," said Alice, as though she were beholding the efficiency man for the first time that day. She was still laughing.

"Good morning," said Hedge cordially, and he sat down.

Constance breathed a faint sigh of relief. One tradition of the Brooke family thus far remained unshattered.

"Well, Connie, have you treated him as you would father?" demanded her brother with a grin.

The magic influence of the breakfast hour still resisted shock. Constance neither blushed nor frowned. She laughed heartily. H. Hedge did likewise, but with a little wrinkle of perplexity between his eyes.

"If there is anything I am missing," he remarked, "I leave it to your sense of fair play to see that I get it."

Alice whooped. Billy, with an air of grave inquiry, stood up and gazed fixedly at the top of the efficiency man's head. The heavy thatch of dark hair caused him to groan regretfully.

"No; you can't get it—not the way father does," he said sadly.

"That's too bad; if there's anything I can do—"

Alice whooped again.

"You—you might live to be fifty or sixty or seventy or eighty years old," she said, "and then maybe you'd be—"

"Alice! Fair play, now," continued Constance.

"Oh, well, if he doesn't want to wait that long, he could—"

Constance reached across the table and laid her hand across her sister's lips.

"Imp!" she said severely. "Don't spoil it. Besides, I'm not the only one, you know."

"Pooh! I'm not afraid," said Alice. "You lead on and watch me."

"Evidently," sighed the efficiency man, "I am not to be treated as father is. Whatever ought to be coming to me, I am not going to get—yet."

Billy looked at Hedge with a sudden air of interest and then beamed upon Constance.

"Did you get that 'yet' stuff, Connie?"

Constance, however, was very busy with an orange, if a trifle flushed. She pretended not to hear. Alice was happy beyond speech; she gurgled her joy. Billy seemed to be contemplating another attack. It was the efficiency man who broke up the situation.

"If you don't mind," he said plaintively, "let's consider the matter of buttons."

"Buttons?"

The three Brookes made the echo in unison.

"Yes—buttons."

"Buttons?" repeated Billy gravely.

"Buttons?" mused Alice, wrinkling her forehead.

"What kind of buttons?" asked Constance.

"Important buttons," said the efficiency man.

"You mean—"

"Vital buttons," he added, helping himself to a chop.

The Brookes were regarding him with undisguised curiosity.

"The matter of buttons," he said, in a preoccupied tone, "and also the problem of attaching them—"

The efficiency man left the sentence unfinished and emerged abruptly from his preoccupation. He had been almost frivolous; rather deliberately so, yet in evident conscientious accord with the breakfast rule that Constance had laid down. But the frivolity died from his eyes as they widened into a hard stare.

He was looking at something that Horace had placed before him.

"Come here, Horace," he commanded sharply.

Horace returned, walking circumspectly and scientifically.

"What are those things?" demanded H. Hedge.

"Strawberries, sir."

"Strawberries!"

"They're great," volunteered Billy. "Try 'em."

The efficiency man ignored the invitation.

"What month is this, Horace?" he asked sternly.

"December, sir."

"You buy strawberries in *December?*"

"Often; yes, sir."

"Is that true, Miss Brooke?"

"Certainly," she replied, somewhat sharply. "Why not?"

"How much did these strawberries cost?"

"I think they're a dollar and a half a box, now, sir," ventured Horace.

"Well, by the great god of extravagance!" exclaimed H. Hedge, pushing back his chair and staring

once again at the Lucullian dish. "How many boxes?"

"There were three delivered, sir."

"Four dollars and a half for strawberries—in December! Why, that's enough money to buy breakfast in this household for a week! Listen, Horace."

"Yes, sir."

"No more strawberries!"

Horace looked doubtfully at his mistress. She was flushing, angrily now, where a few minutes before it had been a token of confusion.

"We are permitted," she said coldly, "to eat what food we prefer. If you do not like strawberries, Mr. Hedge, you need not eat them. Horace, you may bring an orange for Mr. Hedge."

The efficiency man held up his hand for silence.

"Hereafter you will eat what food I order," he said distinctly. "This—" and he pointed at his dish of strawberries—"is the most wanton waste that I have yet witnessed. I sincerely trust it is not typical."

"Oh, but it is," remarked Billy cheerfully.

"So much the worse, then. No more strawberries will be purchased for this house until strawberries are in season. Strawberries—in December!"

Constance's eyes were snapping. "We will have them whenever we want them," she declared vehemently.

"Not on the house," said H. Hedge. "Not on your father's bank-account. You may have oranges, apples, or prunes until further orders."

"Prunes!" shrieked Alice.

"Prunes," he reiterated. "California prunes."

"I never eat prunes."

"Begin, then. They are excellent, healthful and economical."

"I won't."

"Very well. Apples or oranges, then. Both are nutritious. But I want you to remember that the time when this household helps to support a high-priced hot-house has expired."

The three Brookes exchanged glances.

"Horace," said Constance, "you will order and serve strawberries to-morrow morning."

"Horace," said the efficiency man, in equally calm tones, "if you order and serve strawberries to-morrow morning you will pay for them out of your own pocket, after which you will be fired."

Horace looked appealingly at his mistress. She bit her lip, but made no further remark.

So ended the fixed rule for a gay breakfast. H. Hedge had irrevocably smashed it. The three Brookes gave him a silence for the remainder of the meal. It was poor revenge, perhaps, but they were in no mood for speech. It cheered them none to observe that the efficiency man ate the strawberries.

Out in the hall an immaculately garbed maid, Matilda, stood holding Alice's hat and coat and a bundle of school-books.

"Hurry, now, Alice; you're late again," chided Constance. "The car has been waiting ten minutes."

Alice flung herself carelessly into a garment of fur, jammed a rakish little hat over her ruddy hair, seized

her books and raced toward the door. It was swung open for her by Horace, the butler. Down the front steps of the Brooke mansion she leaped, three at a time, crossed the pavement in two bounds, and plunged through the open doorway of a massive limousine. A footman closed the door after her, then swung himself into the seat beside the chauffeur. A second later the fifteen-thousand-dollar English motor-car was rolling impressively up the avenue.

Hedge had followed as far as the front door and saw it all. He watched until the car disappeared around a corner, then returned to where Constance and Billy were still standing.

"Does it take four persons to send Alice to school?" he inquired briskly.

"Sometimes six or seven," remarked Billy carelessly. "Any objection?"

Hedge ignored the poorly disguised contempt of the inquiry with which Billy tipped his answer.

"Now I desire to see you and your sister in the library," he said, and led the way.

Constance whispered to her brother, motioned him to follow the efficiency man, and then hurried upstairs to the telephone in her boudoir.

Mr. Hedge displayed a surprising amount of patience when, after ten minutes, Constance had not made her appearance in the library. If he felt any annoyance he concealed it. He devoted the interval of the work of examining a pile of papers on the center-table. Billy Brooke had settled back in a great

leather chair and was smoking a pipe. There was a glimmer of amusement in his eyes.

Presently Hedge looked across at him.

"Perhaps your sister has forgotten I wished to see her," he remarked.

"Oh, I guess not," yawned Billy. "She'll come when she gets ready. And then you'll get yours."

There was no misunderstanding between the two young men in the library. Breakfast rules were off.

"What am I to get?" inquired Hedge, mildly enough, but not apprehensively.

"Why, you didn't suppose you could get away with all this stuff, did you?"

Billy's voice was disdainful. He added a sneer by way of local color.

"Yes, I have an idea that I will, Mr. Brooke."

"All right. You wait till Connie comes."

"Evidently it's necessary," said Hedge evenly, looking the Brooke youth in the eye.

Billy winced visibly; he had never made a practice of concealing his emotions. The efficiency man had landed on a sore spot with the scion of John W. Brooke, who, only deep in his consciousness—and then only to himself—acknowledged the leadership of his sister. He attempted no answer, but pulled contemptuously at his pipe.

Constance arrived soon and her brother glanced up expectantly. He was not heartened by the look that he found in her eyes. They were bright, but troubled. Her cheeks were far redder than they had been fifteen

minutes earlier. She spread her hands in a helpless gesture and nodded her head slowly.

"It's true, Billy," she half-whispered.

"No!"

"Yes, Billy; true."

"You're *sure,* Connie? No way out?"

The unmistakable anxiety in Billy's voice attracted the attention of Hedge, who studied the brother and sister with plain interest. They seemed for the moment to be oblivious of his presence.

"No way in sight."

"Who did you phone to?"

"The Efficiency Company, first," said Constance. "They confirmed it. Then to father's office. They said he'd gone away and didn't know where, or if they do know they won't tell, which is just as bad."

"Try the lawyers?"

Constance nodded. "They know that a man was to be sent here," she said wearily, "and say that father ordered it. And they said they would only communicate with him in a matter of life or death. Those are his orders, too."

Billy Brooke groaned.

"But Connie—what the blazes are we going to *do?*"

At this point the efficiency man made entrance into the conversation.

"You'll do as your father wishes, of course," he said. "It's the only thing you can do. It's the only sensible thing to do. These are his orders, that's all. Thank you, Miss Brooke, for having satisfied

yourself and your brother that I am possessed of full authority. Now, we'll talk business."

Billy looked doubtfully to his sister. She met the situation by sitting down and waiting for Hedge to begin.

"And speaking of business," observed Hedge, turning a steady gaze upon Billy, "what's yours?"

"Mine?"

"Certainly. When do you go to work, and where?"

"I don't go," drawled Billy.

"Is it a fact that this grown man does not work?" demanded Hedge, his question addressed to the girl. For the first time since his entrance into the house the efficiency man showed symptoms of emotion.

Constance was silent for an instant. In nearly all things she was a stanch champion of her brother. In this she was not. She was not proud of him as an idler.

"My brother does not work," she answered in a low voice.

"How old are you?" asked Hedge, turning again to Billy.

"Twenty-two, if that's any satisfaction to you."

Billy's attempt to display indifference was poorly executed.

"Sick?"

"Do I look it?"

He did not look sick. He was very healthy—and very uncomfortable.

"He tried the hardware business with father," said

Constance defensively, "but—well, he wasn't suited for it."

If Billy was suffering from a certain amount of superficial discomfort, his sister was suffering shame. She dropped her gaze for a moment and compressed her lips tightly.

"All right; I'll find him something to do."

Billy straightened up in his chair and thrust out his chin.

"Is *that* so?" he said in fine contempt. "I didn't read anything in the orders about that."

"You were charged by your father to obey me, weren't you?"

"Oh—perhaps."

"And if your father were here, and he ordered you to go to work, you would, wouldn't you?"

"That's different."

"Not one bit different. For all necessary purposes, *I'm* your father. And I consider it necessary for you to work. That settles that."

The efficiency man said these awful words without any display of heat, which made them seem the more awful. They fell upon Billy like an icy avalanche. And Constance, hateful as this strange man was to her and filled with a resolve never to submit to his bidding, was somehow unable to fling herself to the aid of her brother. He was on treacherous ground, unable to fight a good fight.

"Ever keep books or card indexes?" asked Hedge.

Billy shook his head.

"I can teach you. Ever run a typewriter?"

"No!"

"You'll learn—in time. What can you do anyhow?"

"He—he can run an automobile," said Constance hastily.

She was not particularly proud of the answer, after it was out; she was afraid it was not impressive. But it was true. Billy could run an automobile wonderfully. He had been arrested eight times and his license had been revoked twice.

"Good idea; guess I will, Connie."

The expert driver got out of his leather chair and moved toward the door.

"Very well; run your automobile—to-day," said the efficiency man significantly. "But don't forget when you come back that you're my clerk."

"Clerk!"

"You're getting it. Good morning."

Billy paused long enough to think of a reply—long enough, yet without achieving one. Instead, he asked a question.

"I say, Connie, lend me a ten-spot, will you?"

"Sorry, Billy; I'm broke."

H. Hedge did not volunteer either a ten-spot or a nickel, and Billy stalked from the room. Two minutes later a yellow roadster buzzed out of the Brooke courtyard. It was the kind of roadster that is unnecessarily and unbelievably close to the ground, like a dachshund. It had wire wheels, a throaty exhaust, and in order to drive it you had to lie on your back. Billy was great at that.

"While I have the matter in mind," said H. Hedge, addressing Constance, "tell me how far it is to Alice's school."

"Six or seven blocks," answered Constance carelessly.

"I imagined it was something like that. Hereafter, Alice will walk to school. It is good exercise, and the fresh air will clear her mind for her studies."

Constance was about to retort hotly when, with a gesture, he abruptly dismissed the subject.

"Here," he said, placing his hand upon a small pile of flat volumes, "is a set of books. Until your brother is familiar with the work, I'll take care of them. They are book-keeping books. A complete set of household accounts will be kept, with a separate account for each department. It's the loose-leaf system, of course."

Just why it was "of course" Constance did not know; she was not familiar with loose-leaf systems.

"I have here," he continued, indicating, "a set of daily report cards; in fact, two sets. The set for the servants is buff-colored, that for members of the family white. On these cards will be reported daily all matters of concern to the household. Servants will report as to what duties they have performed during the day, in what manner, *et cetera*, as well as what things have been left unperformed. In this way we shall soon systematize the work and establish a proper schedule of hours."

Constance smiled faintly. There was a vision in

her mind of Giovanni, the furnace man, making out his report.

"The report cards for the family will contain brief memoranda of what each member has done during the day, a statement of conduct, of personal expenses, *et cetera,* together with any suggestions for the improvement of conditions or criticisms of the work of employees."

"You mean to say," asked Constance slowly, "that you expect us—me—to make out one of those cards —every day?"

"Certainly. You will see the advantage of it later."

Constance relapsed into silence again.

"I have here," he resumed pleasantly, "a filing case and card-index system. In it all report cards will be filed, after being properly classified. There will be a personal index, as well as a subject index. All correspondence relating to household matters will be filed. There are certain other features of the general system of management that I shall put into effect, and which I can best explain as we come to them in actual practice. By the way, how old are you?"

Constance stiffened in her chair. Not that she cared—but the question was offensive.

"Why—I—you—"

"About twenty?" he suggested, studying her critically.

"You happen to be correct," she answered in a frozen tone.

To her horror the efficiency man reached a blank

card from a small pile. It was neatly ruled in blue, with black printing on it and numerous white spaces. There was a round hole punched at the bottom.

H. Hedge picked up a pen, dipped it, and began to write. Although the card was upside down to her, she could easily read the legible characters that he set down in one of the spaces. He had written "C. Brooke." Then came another line: "Age—20." He paused and looked up.

"Ever work?"

Constance stood up and leaned forward. He did not seem to be aware of anything unusual in her demeanor. After pausing briefly for an answer, he wrote down in a white space "No occupation."

"Unmarried, I suppose?" he asked.

"You unthinkable *wretch!*"

"Hardly an answer to my question," he suggested pleasantly.

Constance had placed both hands on the desk to steady herself and looked down at him. There was room for nothing but rage in her fine gray eyes.

"The servants will throw you out," she said in a shaking voice.

"If they attempt it, I will discharge the servants. I should regret to be compelled to do that."

"You—you— Oh, this is all so horrible! It's not true! It *can't* be!"

"But it's quite true, Miss Brooke."

She stood trembling, in spite of an effort to steady herself against the desk. For an instant her voice failed her.

"I tell you, I *will not* bear it! I will not endure this thing in my own home. My father would not have me endure it. You tell me that *I* shall do this, and *I* shall do that—*you,* an utter stranger! You order my servants about! You take possession of my—*our*—house as if it were your own. You insult my sister. You insult me! You would insult my brother—if you *dared!*"

"I thought I had," murmured H. Hedge softly.

She did not hear him, perhaps because one of her tightly clenched fists was beating itself pink against the mahogany.

"I will never obey you! Never! *Never!*"

"You are appointed my secretary," he said with apparent irrelevance, at the same time making a note on a pad.

For answer, she flew into a tempest of tears and turned away, just in time to fling herself into the arms of Matilda, who had been listening outside the doorway until she could no longer restrain herself.

The efficiency man did not look at them as Matilda half carried her sobbing burden from the library. He missed wholly Matilda's backward glance. Instead, he bent over his index card and wrote carefully in the proper space:

"Unmarried."

He paused a moment and studied the next blank line. When he had completed the necessary entry, it read:

"Temperament—Uncertain."

CHAPTER V

MAKING AN IMPRESSION

THE efficiency man sat at the desk for a long time, working placidly. He wrote upon many blank forms. He identified, labeled, and dated a quantity of account books. He filled out numerous filing cards, which he arranged with swiftness, yet painstaking care, in small drawers, which he labeled "A. to F.," and so on to "Z," although he was not sure there was anything that began with a Z. Twice he yawned and stretched; he had been up since six-thirty and was still subject to human limitations.

It was past two o'clock when he glanced at his watch. Immediately he rang for the butler.

"When is lunch served?" he asked.

"It has been served—at one o'clock," replied Horace coldly.

"Why was I not notified?"

"Mr. Brooke never has his luncheon at home, sir."

"Who had lunch?"

"Miss Brooke."

"Nobody else?"

"No, sir."

"Hereafter I wish to be called for lunch."

"Yes, sir."

"Bring me a sandwich and a glass of milk."

"Very well, sir."

But H. Hedge was so busy at his card indexes when Horace returned with the order that the sandwich and the milk stood on the desk for half an hour before he noticed them.

Alice came home in the middle of the afternoon. She tiptoed past the door of the library and saw him intent upon his writing. For an instant she hesitated, uncertain; then apparently changed her mind about something, passed on through the hall and went upstairs. She found Constance in her private den on the second floor.

"Why is he still here?" demanded Alice, flinging her books on the floor.

Constance made a weary gesture and tried to resume her reading.

"But I thought we were to get rid of him," persisted Alice, surprise and disappointment unmistakable in her voice.

The elder sister tossed her novel into a corner and contemplated Alice as though the latter were quite incapable of understanding.

"But, Connie, you said—"

"Never mind what I said. He's here—and it looks as if he were here to stay."

"Connie!" Alice sat down and stared.

"Yes—to stay," repeated Constance bitterly.

Alice swallowed a few times and looked about her. Somehow the Brooke mansion seemed an unfamiliar place. A subtle change, atmospheric, perhaps, had

been wrought. Everything was in its usual place—yet everything looked different. Everything *felt* wrong. Unconscious of it, the sisters spoke in low tones.

"Where's Billy?" asked Alice.

"Out in his car."

"Couldn't he think of anything?"

"Certainly not. Did you expect him to?"

Alice hitched an ankle across one knee and looked thoughtful.

"No, I guess not," she assented. "Did—did he run out on you?"

"Approximately."

"And what did you do?"

"Oh, had a row," languidly.

"Throw anything?"

"Me?"

"Uh-huh."

"You know perfectly well I've outgrown that, Alice. Don't be silly."

"Still, it's usually best; it's simplest," said Alice. "But how are we going to get him out of the house?"

"I'm not sure that we are."

"Don't tell me you've quit, Connie?"

"Of course, I haven't quit," retorted Constance. "If you'd only suggest, and not criticize, we'd get somewhere. Incidentally, hereafter you walk to school."

"I—*what?*"

"You are to hit the trail afoot—he said so."

Alice gasped and turned pink.

"Never!" she cried. "First it's prunes, and then it's pedestrianism. I tell you, I'll not stand it, Connie. I'll—I'll tear up all his papers. I'll wreck his office!"

"Nonsense," said Constance. "That's foolishness."

"Well, we have to fight the devil with fire, you know."

Alice spoke as if the wisdom of centuries had descended upon her.

"Perhaps—when the devil will fight. But what are you going to do when he simply won't? What chance is there when he just sits and looks at you and then makes the most insulting remark in a perfectly calm voice? If he would only get mad, and rant—and swear—that would be something! It would be a beginning anyhow. But, as it is, you might as well go out and call names at one of the statues in the park. The statue would still be there when you were speechless."

Alice arose and strolled to the window. Presently she turned and said:

"Here comes Billy, now. We'll get him up here and see if he has thought of anything."

Constance shook her head idly. She was not optimistic as to Billy's thinking. She rather feared that if the E. E. incubus was to be removed, the thinking would have to be done in her own head.

It was not the magnitude of the problem that daunted her; it was the elusiveness of it. There seemed to be no place of beginning. H. Hedge had settled himself upon the household like a giant

kraken; his tentacles were everywhere and it seemed perfectly useless to try cutting an odd one here and there. Besides, as yet she possessed no weapon.

Billy Brooke found his sisters in moody silence.

"How'd you make out, Connie?" he demanded.

"At least as well as you did, before you ran away."

"Oh, come. There wasn't any use of my staying. Why, I'd have only batted him one, if I had."

Constance regarded her brother with a faint smile, the significance of which he was quick to appreciate.

"Oh, you needn't do that," he growled. "I tell you Connie, I was getting ready to paste him. He knew it, too; another minute and—"

"It's too bad you were so busy you couldn't wait another minute."

Billy snorted.

"Think I'm afraid of him, eh?"

"No, indeed," said Constance, with ironical emphasis. "I'm sure he never threatened you—"

"He'd better not!"

—"with anything except work."

William W. Brooke flushed a deep red.

"Work!" he blurted. "What do you think of that, Alice? He thinks he's going to make me work!"

"Well, I have to go to school," said Alice unsympathetically. "I don't see why you shouldn't work, or run for Congress, or do something to fill your time."

Billy strode the length of the room and back again, scowling.

"Well, anyhow," he said, "I've doped out the proper scheme and I'm going to see about it to-day."

The sisters looked interested; yet Constance was cautious.

"We'll go to Uncle Roscoe. He'll fix it. He'll do anything for you, Connie."

Alice pounded a fist into her palm and nodded emphatic approval.

"The very thing!" she cried. "Uncle Ros will come down here and run the whole shebang, if we want him to. And he's some uncle."

Constance shook her head.

"Well, what's the matter?" demanded Billy.

"We are not going to Uncle Roscoe," she said firmly. "You are not even to think of it, Billy."

"Why not? Wouldn't he do it?"

"Perhaps; yes, probably—if he could. That's not the point, though. We are not going to Uncle Roscoe, or anybody. This is our affair."

"Maybe. But suppose we're not able to tackle it?"

"It's still our affair, just the same," declared Constance grimly.

"But what's the objection to calling in help, particularly when it's all in the family?" queried Alice.

"Pride! That's reason enough."

"Well, I don't see that dolling ourselves up in pride is going to get us anything," said Billy grouchily.

"It may not get us anything," remarked Constance, "but we still have our pride. I don't propose to let go of mine, at any rate. Why, think of it! Do you want to make us a laughing stock of all our relatives

and friends? Do you suppose we'll get any sympathy? Granted that Uncle Roscoe might help us out—wouldn't he be splitting his sides all the time he was doing it? Not for me!"

Constance stood up and made a vivid gesture with both arms.

"Are we going to advertise what has happened to us? Heaven knows it may come out anyhow, in spite of us. That's bad enough. Do you realize what would happen if the newspapers got hold of this? Have you thought of that?"

Alice looked startled.

"I don't propose to be laughed at, if I can help it," declared Constance, her voice rising. "Besides, this is our business and nobody else's. I'm not going to trot around looking for comfort on the outside. If we can't handle this thing ourselves, then we deserve what we're getting. So far as I've ever heard, the Brookes always fought their own battles."

Constance was a very fair representative of Brooke going into combat. Her eyes were snapping and there was a tilt to her chin.

"No, sir, Billy Brooke," looking her brother squarely in the eye. "You don't go to Uncle Roscoe with this, or to anybody else. And, if there's any way to help it, you're not to let people find out about it."

He shrugged his substantial shoulders and looked despairingly at Alice.

"I suppose we're to stand for anything then," he grumbled.

"Not necessarily," said Constance. "I haven't quit, anyhow. I'll admit I can't see the way out—yet. But that doesn't mean that I won't find one—or you, or Alice. Heavens! What do we have brains for?"

"So we can get a headache," drawled Alice. "I'm tired of thinking about it already."

Constance ignored the remark.

"Let's all put our minds to it and get together on it to-night, if we can," she concluded. "It's a pity if we can't do something. And meantime, mind you, Billy—and Alice—not a word to anybody, even the servants—except, perhaps, Horace."

The Brooke butler was occasionally consulted in his extra capacity as an oracle.

"Oh, all right," sighed Billy. "By the way, Connie, you're sure you haven't got a ten-spot?"

"I've got less than three dollars."

"How about you, Alice?"

"I'm flat." Then she brightened. "Why, this is allowance day!"

"Gee whiz! That's right; I forgot. But say—"

Billy stopped short and regarded his sisters with an expression of dreadful doubt.

"Do we—do we—"

His voice sounded hollow and faltered again.

"Suppose you try it first," suggested Constance. "You've got to do something once in a while, Billie, dear."

She smiled maliciously, she could still afford to. Billy and Alice were broke, but nearly three dollars

stood between her and humiliation. They loomed big, a veritable bulwark of riches.

A sound of voices in the hall caught the ears of the three Brooke children.

"We will first inventory Mr. Brooke's suite," the efficiency man was saying. "Then we will take the other apartments on this floor in turn."

"Very well, sir," said the subdued voice of Horace.

After an awful minute, Alice stole softly to the door of Constance's den and looked out. Then she signaled a clear track. The three Brookes, single file, tiptoed into the hall and up the stairs that led to the floor above.

Mr. Hedge went about his inventory work with an ease and certainty that amazed Horace, who, while he could perceive no sense whatever in the work itself, none the less reluctantly admitted to himself that it was being done in a workmanlike manner, the quick, keen eyes of Hedge missing nothing. He required no explanation from his guide. Like a good census man, he put down all he saw and did it with a speed that was amazing. He passed briskly from one room to another, inexorably recording their contents on large printed blanks.

To Horace it was foolishness; to Hedge it was a holy crusade.

The third floor followed the second, but there were no Brooke children in sight. Horace knew why, but the efficiency man was yet to learn.

"Fourth floor next," said Hedge snappily, as he produced a fresh set of blanks.

Horace led the way. At the head of the stairs he turned sharply to the left and walked along a short hallway that ended at a closed door. The butler laid his hand on the knob and paused.

Most curious sounds came from the other side of the door. There was a rapid, steady, and hollow beating noise, for one thing, with an accelerating tempo. There was a noise of stamping feet, at irregular intervals, mingled with soft thuds—six or seven stamps to each thud. There was a screeching, wheezing sort of noise, accompanied by a metallic rattling. Then just as Horace turned the knob, there was a boisterous laugh.

The butler stepped respectfully aside, and the efficiency man stood on the threshold of a large room that ran the full width of the house.

First in his vision, and to occupy it for a period of several interested seconds, came Constance Brooke. She stood beneath a large wooden disk, suspended horizontally from the ceiling. From the center of the disk hung a cord, and from the end of the cord dangled a leather bag, snugly inflated with air.

Constance wore a white sweater and a skirt that did not reach to her knees. There was no reason why it should, for Constance represented a splendid phase of efficiency without too much economy. Red stockings and white canvas shoes, laced high above her ankles, completed her costume, with the exception of a pair of stout but tight-fitting leather gloves.

Her hands were doubled into fists and the fists were smashing rhythmically—right, left, right, left—against

the swaying bag. Every time a fist drove the bag against the wooden disk, the bag rebounded only to meet another fist lying craftily in wait. Constance was breathing sharply; her eyes were glistening with excitement.

Suddenly she stepped in closer and began to use elbows as well as fists, alternating them in a bewildering play that doubled the speed of the bag. Faster, faster, swung the tortured bag, frantically seeking escape from its tether. With the steady, swift swing of her arms the girl's body swayed easily from side to side, balancing from the hips, while her feet were planted sturdily on the floor, supporting her with a sureness that knew no retreat.

Whether natural or acquired, Constance had a "hook" that was amazing for accuracy and vim.

For an instant the efficiency man's gaze roved. Alice, garbed much as her sister, with the exception that she wore loose knickerbockers instead of a skirt, was just clearing a bar that was balanced some four feet from the floor. Billy was pulling viciously at a set of pulley weights attached to the farther wall. Scattered about the gymnasium were several pieces of idle apparatus.

There was a sharp snap and the beating of the bag against its wooden barrier ceased abruptly. H. Hedge turned his head, just in time to see a globular object approaching him at appalling speed. There was no time to dodge. The missile struck him fairly in the middle of his forehead, bounded back with equal suddenness, and rolled along the floor to a far corner.

A broken cord was dangling over Constance Brooke's head as she stood rigid for an instant, breathing heavily and staring with wide eyes at the efficiency man. He was rubbing his forehead in a bewildered way and returning her stare. There was a shriek of laughter from Alice; an "I'll be—" from Billy.

The bag-puncher bit her lip, frowned, but said never a word. Pulling off her gloves, she tossed them aside, marched rapidly to the door, brushed past Hedge and disappeared. Horace noted a glint of triumph in her eyes.

The efficiency man strolled across the gymnasium and retrieved the bag from the corner where it lay. He examined it curiously, noting the broken bit of cord that was attached to it and nodding his head in evident approval. As he turned the leather sphere in his hands he observed that it had been marked upon, apparently with chalk. The inscription was half obliterated by busy fists, yet still legible. It said:

H. HEDGE, E. E.

"It seems that each one has her own way of producing an impression," mused the efficiency man. "I'll admit I'm impressed!"

CHAPTER VI

GRATUITIES, OR ALLOWANCES?

THEY made Alice do it, after dinner. A furtive inspection of the efficiency man revealed no scars as a result of his encounter with the punching bag; he displayed no discernible sign of a grudge. The time seemed as propitious as any, while the need was dire and urgent.

Alice played that she was reading, and presently looked up from her magazine and murmured softly:

"There's an article about poverty here, Mr. Hedge. It must be awful."

"Sinful," he affirmed.

"Were you ever poor?"

"I? Indeed, yes." He looked at her sharply.

"But you're not poor now?"

"Not—exactly."

"I am," said Alice, plaintively.

H. Hedge made an exclamation with his eyes.

"I don't own a solitary buck," added Alice. "Neither does Billy. And Connie has only two-seventy-nine."

She paused impressively, then continued:

"But—this is pay day."

"Pay day?" echoed H. Hedge, wrinkling his forehead. "Whose?"

"Why—ours!" Alice's gesture included the other Brookes.

Constance was studiously observing the fire, while Billy continued his artistic ramble. The keen ears of neither, however, missed a word.

"I didn't know you had a pay day," remarked Hedge.

"Yes, indeed! Once a month, you know."

"That's interesting, I'm sure. Who pays you?"

"Father, of course. Who else would?"

"What for?"

Alice stared at him uneasily, then ventured a side-long glance at Constance. That young lady's head was turned away.

"Why—why, just for being his children, of course!"

"You mean that you get salaries for being Mr. Brooke's children?"

"Allowance, I suppose you'd call it," answered Alice with a hesitant smile.

"Oh!" said the efficiency man, his bewilderment vanishing. "You mean that each of you receives a stated gratuity from your father."

Billy glared blackly at Hedge, who failed to perceive the expression. Constance, her head still averted, was frowning.

"He never calls it that," faltered Alice, angry, yet mindful of the end rather than the means. "He—he just pays it."

"And what do you do in return for it?"

"We? Why, we just love him!"

Constance cleared her throat ostentatiously. It was a signal. She did not favor Alice's flank attack; she had counseled a frontal assault, boldly and swiftly executed. Besides, Alice seemed about to commit the family to an impossible policy.

"I see," said the efficiency man gravely. "And how much does he pay you?"

"Billy and Connie, two hundred dollars a month. Me, one hundred. I'm to be raised at my next birthday."

H. Hedge began to write figures on a pad.

"And this," added Alice, "is the day that all the money is due."

Hedge continued to figure for a moment.

"I find from your statement," he said, looking up, "that your father distributes to you three children gratuities amounting in all to $6,000 annually."

"Really, so much as that?" asked Alice deprecatingly. "But you see, it's only a little at a time. And father has such a lot more."

Billy, who had strolled close to Constance, leaned over and said in a growling whisper:

"Coarse work. She's flummuxed."

"Hush, Billy. Wait."

"I suppose," the efficiency man observed, "that this is a request for me to continue a distribution of the gratuities."

Alice stifled an angry exclamation, flushed, and then nodded. She could not stack her pride against a hundred dollars a month, particularly when she was "flat." Hedge made some more figures.

"I will continue these gratuities," he said, abruptly.

"Allowances, *please!*" reminded Alice.

"Allowances, if you prefer it. One word is as short as the other. I shall, however, reduce them."

Constance rose out of her chair as if impelled by some unseen force. She wheeled and glared across the room. Billy stopped in his tracks.

"All allowances will be reduced fifty per cent.," announced Hedge, "until further investigation."

There was a mobilization of Brookes on the opposite side of the table. Alice was thankful for the arrival of her reserves.

"You are to cut—our allowances—in half?" she asked slowly.

"In half—payable daily," said the efficiency man.

"*Daily!*"

"Daily."

Alice was frightened. She felt the reassuring hand of Constance on her shoulder and looked up at her appealingly.

"You do the rest, Connie," she murmured.

"I find," said Hedge as he continued to make rapid figures, "that your father has been paying two of you at the rate of approximately $6.66 a day, including Sundays and holidays, and the other at the rate of about $3.33 a day. Out of this what do you spend?"

"All," said Billy. "What did you expect?"

"What for?"

"Why, anything we want, of course!"

"Clothing—shoes—light or heat?" queried Hedge briskly.

"Most certainly not!" exclaimed Constance frigidly.

"Do you mean to tell me, Miss Brooke, that you, for example, do not at least purchase your clothing out of the sum of $2,400 a year?"

Constance laughed, but it was mirthless. She glanced down at her dress, and continued to laugh.

"If you understood anything about gowns, you would not ask such a question," she said. "Of course, I do not use my allowance for any such purpose. It is wholly for personal expenses, as I see fit to use it."

"Clothes are personal, are they not?"

"Personal—perhaps," she admitted coldly. "But they are on father."

"And is this also true of you?" demanded Hedge, glancing sharply at Billy.

"And then some," declared Billy. "Why, I don't even buy gasoline out of mine!"

"Well," observed Hedge judicially, "if none of you employ your allowances in the purchase of food, clothing, or the necessities of life, which are otherwise provided by your father, I see no legitimate reason for any allowances at all."

There was a chorus of cries from the three Brookes.

"Nevertheless," he continued, "I am not disposed to be harsh; merely just. I am not here to tear down or destroy; simply to reorganize and regulate. While I feel that even a reduction of fifty per cent. in your allowances does not fully meet this extraordinary situation, I shall not press the matter further at this

time. Miss Brooke and Mr. Brooke, you will hereafter receive $3.33 per day each. Alice, you will be paid $1.66. All payments will be made daily, at eight-thirty o'clock in the morning in this office, and vouchers will be duly signed by each person receiving the same."

Constance was turned into a stony image. Alice was trembling, with a tell-tale quiver of her lips. Billy stormed.

"We won't stand for it!" he cried, shaking his fist across the desk.

Whereupon the efficiency man asked a famous question:

"What are you going to do about it?"

"Fight!"

"Very good. How?"

"Why—why, simply refuse to put up with it!"

"You mean rather than accept less than two hundred dollars a month you will take nothing? Is that it?"

Billy hesitated and felt Constance pulling at his sleeve.

"Because," added Hedge, "if that is the case, I shall be greatly gratified. I really cannot see why you children need any money at all, living as you do and being fully provided for. If you refuse to accept a reduced gratuity it will mean, of course, that I shall save a hundred, instead of fifty per cent., on this item of household waste. I should be glad to make such a saving. Are you with me or against me?"

"Against you!"

It was the shrill and quivering voice of Alice that cried out.

The efficiency man sighed.

"Very well," he said. "All allowances are reduced by one-half, to go into effect without further notice."

Constance rallied from her stupor.

"We accept this humiliation," she said bitterly, "because, until our father returns, we can do nothing else. We are helpless. You have insulted us by calling it a gratuity. We are not beggars—but we are again helpless. But we do demand that our allowances, or such part of them as you see fit to pay, shall be given to us in the regular manner, in a lump sum monthly."

"A month in advance?" said the efficiency man, elevating his eyebrows. "Why? Do you spend it all the first day?"

"Of course not. But that does not alter our right to receive it all at once."

"Too much temptation," said Hedge, shaking his head. "Besides, it's not economic. Perhaps you do not know it, but many banks pay interest on daily balances. This is the case with the bank in which your father left an account for this household. That account is under my sole charge. By paying the three of you $250 a month in advance an appreciable amount of interest will be lost. By paying you $8.32 per day, the remainder of a considerable sum, reduced, of course, by daily drafts, remains at in-

terest. That is the policy that I shall follow. You will be paid in checks, each morning."

"This," said Constance, stonily, "is the crowning outrage."

"I'm sorry you look at it that way, Miss Brooke. It is simply good business. However, I'm willing to put it this way, if you object to a daily check—I will make weekly payments, at the end, however, rather than the beginning of the week. If you accept this arrangement, the first payment will be made a week from to-day."

Constance wavered. She had $2.79 left. Perhaps for a week she could stand it. But Billy and Alice were to be thought of. They were destitute. No; the pride of the Brooke family would have to grovel before this creature. It was the daily wage, or bankruptcy.

"We wish to talk it over," she said.

"Certainly," assented Hedge.

Constance led the way across the hall, through the big reception-room and into a far corner of the music-room, where they were safe from prying ears. It was Billy who spoke first.

"You made a fine mess of it, Alice!" he exclaimed.

"Alice did her best," declared Constance defensively. "Would you have done any better?"

"Well, why couldn't she have given him the idea we earned this money, or something like that?"

"Earn it!" jeered Alice. "A lot we do to earn it, and you know it."

"He talks as if we were panhandlers," growled Billy.

"It—it was like standing on a bread line," groaned Alice.

"Come," interrupted Constance. "We've got to decide. It's half, or nothing."

"I won't take half!" stormed her brother.

"Do you want nothing, then? You know very well none of us ever had a bank account. We never even thought of asking for one, when father was here. Now, listen; you'd better take this fifty per cent. offer, because if you don't, Billy, you won't have a cent to your name."

There was an inarticulate rumbling in his throat.

"And you'll be in the same fix, Alice, all of us," continued Constance. "We can't go around like beggars; you know it. For my part, I'm going to take mine."

"Can't we borrow the rest somewhere?"

"Billy!"

The proposal shocked Constance, because it assailed her Brooke pride.

"None of us will ever borrow, if I can help it," she said stoutly. Then, after a pause: "Well, now that we've accepted half, shall we take it by the day or the week?"

"Let's go back and fight for it by the month in advance," said Billy.

Constance shook her head.

"It would do no good," she said. "Don't you see how he's got us? He has all the money and we've

only got $2.79 between us—and that's all mine. And I can see he is not going to change his mind. He hasn't yet, on anything. For my part, I can stand it by the week. But I'm thinking of you and Alice."

Constance was canny as well as cautious. She knew the failings of the Brookes, even her own.

"I guess it'll have to be by the day," admitted Alice. "Because I need my little $1.66 to-morrow to go to a matinée."

Constance looked at her brother.

"Oh, any way you say," he grumbled.

"It's settled, then. We all get our checks to-morrow morning."

"It seems to me you're giving in on every blooming thing," complained Billy, with an ungrateful scowl at his sister.

Constance smiled wisely.

"Listen, my children," she said. "This person has cut our allowances in half. Very well. But he hasn't cut our charge accounts, has he? We can run up bills, can't we? We don't have to say anything about that, do we? For one, I resolve to spend three times as much as I ever did before!"

"And I!" cried Alice. "You're a wonder, Connie!"

Billy was grudging of enthusiasm. Being a man, the pastime of charging things did not compare with the sensation of having the money in his pocket.

"Now, not a word about charge accounts," cautioned Constance.

"Not a word," echoed Alice.

The efficiency man greeted the returning conferees

with a friendly smile and nod. They ranged before him, Constance in the center.

"We accept the half rate," she said coldly, "not because it is fair or even decent, but because we cannot help ourselves. And"—she choked for an instant—"we have decided to take it by the day."

"Excellent," said Hedge. "Good business. Thank you, Miss Brooke."

"I do not care to be thanked, if you please."

"Very well. Withdrawn."

Constance shot him a fierce glance, but checked a retort. There was still an item of business.

"Our money was due to-day," she explained, "but we are not to be paid until to-morrow morning, I understand. There will then be two days due. Billy and myself will be entitled to a check for $6.66 each, instead of $3.33, while Alice will get $3.33 instead of $1.66. Is that agreed?"

"Quite correct," nodded Hedge, as he made a memorandum.

Alice and Billy sighed softly and looked in admiration at their sister. Neither had thought of that. Connie had saved them a day's pay!

As the three Brookes retired once more from the scene, there was something like approval in the eyes of the efficiency man, as their glance followed the central figure in the group. He admired good business.

CHAPTER VII

AND DEMOSTHENES

MATILDA ARAMINTA JONES was a person with an obsession. The obsession was Constance Brooke. Matilda came from New England, which signifies that the obsession was of the most virulent type. It extended not only to Constance, but to all things over which Constance exercised dominion. Therefore it included Demosthenes. And when Matilda, who was Constance's maid, saw Demosthenes held at arm's length by the scruff of his neck, she went forth to battle.

Demosthenes was a Pomeranian philosopher who enjoyed the distinction of being the personal property of the chatelaine of the Brooke mansion. But he was not in a philosophic mood when H. Hedge stepped on him in the library and thereby made the discovery that he was an inmate of the house. He was even less philosophic when he launched four pounds of palpitating dog flesh at the heels of economy and efficiency, in retaliation for having been used as a rug.

H. Hedge, being quick with his hands, laid hold of Demosthenes with little or no delay, and removed him from the vicinity of his heels. He shook him

quite roughly, and was still shaking him when Matilda entered the room.

"Stop!" said Matilda tragically.

H. Hedge stopped the shaking process, but still held Demosthenes pendant by the scruff.

"Put him down!" commanded Matilda.

"What is it?" asked the efficiency man, surveying the struggling philosopher.

"It?" repeated Matilda in an awful voice. *"It!* That is Miss Connie's dog!"

"You mean to say that this is really a dog?"

Matilda choked. In her soul she prayed that Demosthenes might not hear the insult.

"Put him down!" she commanded.

"I think not," remarked H. Hedge calmly. "He wants to bite me. And, whether he is a dog or a rat, I do not care to be bitten. I think I shall dispose of him."

Matilda turned pale. Demosthenes was to be disposed of! Some horror was afoot. She fled from the library and sought her mistress upstairs.

"He is killing Demosthenes!" cried Matilda.

Constance waited for no more. She raced downstairs, two steps at a time, sure-footed as a mountain-goat, yet apparently risking her neck at every stride. The efficiency man still had the small black creature at arm's length when she appeared on the scene.

"Drop him!" cried Constance.

H. Hedge turned and surveyed her with great gravity.

"If I drop him, he will bite me in the ankle," he

said. "I object to being bitten in the ankle. I broke one once, and that is sufficient."

Constance dashed across the room and gathered Demosthenes in her arms. He was a very small bundle, but he snapped angrily at H. Hedge and snarled in a manner that would have terrified a stout-hearted mouse.

"Does that thing belong to you?" demanded H. Hedge.

"*Thing!* He is my dog!"

"What is his name—Molecule?"

"His name is Demosthenes."

"Why so much name for a little dog? It's disproportionate—inappropriate."

The efficiency man devoted another moment of brief study to his late assailant.

"In fact," said Hedge, "why keep the dog at all? A dog has no place in domestic economy. It contributes nothing to wealth or comfort; it is a non-producer. It is sometimes dangerous, usually an annoyance, and invariably an expense. What does it cost to feed this dog?"

Constance uttered an exclamation of contempt.

"Cost! Do you think I have nothing to do but inquire into the cost of keeping Demosthenes? What difference does it make anyhow? All I know is that he cost five hundred dollars when he was new."

"And how long have you had him?"

"A year, at least."

"We'll mark off twenty per cent. for depreciation,"

said Hedge, after a swift mental calculation. "I doubt if he would even bring four hundred now."

"Sir!"

"No second-hand or even slightly used dog is worth as much as a new one. That's simply business. But in spite of depreciation there is, of course, no reduction in the cost of upkeep. Therefore, we are maintaining an entirely useless and steadily depreciating animal at a cost that rapidly increases in proportion to actual value."

A second-hand dog! Constance was speechless. Unconsciously, she hugged Demosthenes closer.

"I do not think I am justified in consenting to an expenditure for such a wasteful purpose," added Hedge, eying the dog with complete disfavor.

"You are perfectly preposterous!" said Constance.

"But scientifically correct," he replied imperturbably. "I think I shall have to ask you to dispose of the dog. I will endeavor to obtain the best price possible."

"Price! For my dog! Do you think I would sell him at *any* price?"

"I should certainly advise it. In fact, I should be quite willing to credit the proceeds to your personal account."

Constance glared at him.

"You are not possibly serious?"

"Quite. I admit that, in all probability, the cost per diem of this animal is not a large item. It is the principle to which I object. There are a thousand and one trivial sources of expense in this household.

"I am checking them as I encounter them. Although none may be great in itself, the effect of each is to inculcate wasteful habits and destroy a sense of true economic values, while the total expense of all is a very considerable sum. I am here to do my duty by your father."

"Do you know that my father gave me this dog?" inquired Constance triumphantly.

The efficiency man did not seem abashed.

"I am not concerned with the source of origin of any given thing in this house," he said. "I merely consider it as a desirable or necessary part of the establishment."

"Suppose my father had given me a St. Bernard or a Dane instead of a Pomeranian?" observed Constance with fine scorn. "Do you know how much St. Bernards eat?"

"I have never had occasion to inquire, but I presume I could readily learn," answered the efficiency man so gravely that Constance was faintly uncertain as to whether she was being treated seriously.

"Well," she said, "if you ever attempt in any way to interfere with my dog—*mine,* understand—I shall immediately get several very large dogs and establish them in this house. Then you will have a chance to find out exactly how much they eat. The idea! Why, even you will have to admit that Demosthenes is more economical than a Great Dane!"

"Probably true, Miss Brooke. Nevertheless, if you persist in keeping this animal, I shall ask you to maintain it out of your allowance. I am not justified in

permitting it to draw supplies from the general account."

Demosthenes, who had been eying the efficiency man with obvious disquiet, at this instant voiced a small growl.

"And by the way, Miss Brooke, I have observed a large aquarium in the conservatory, in which are a number of goldfish. While these fish are also non-producers and are of a quite useless type, not being edible, what I chiefly criticize is the fact that there is a steady flow of water through this tank night and day.

"At an estimate of half a gallon per minute, this tank is consuming seven hundred and twenty gallons of water per day. Do you know that this house pays for water according to the measurement of a meter? That tank alone is consuming over two hundred and sixty thousand gallons of water per year! It cannot be permitted."

"Indeed? And do you know what my father will do if you attempt to get rid of it?"

Hedge shook his head indifferently.

"He will probably kill you," said Constance calmly. "Those are his goldfish. They are his hobby. He breeds them; he has developed several new types. Why, he has been offered as high as a hundred dollars for a single specimen!"

"He took it, of course."

"Most certainly not. But he has presented several specimens to the public aquarium and to scientific societies."

"I am glad you mentioned the matter," said Hedge, making a memorandum. "I shall at least feel justified in disposing of a sufficient quantity to defray the cost of water and food."

"You try it!" said Constance significantly as she turned her back upon him and walked away with Demosthenes.

Fifteen minutes later, behind the locked door of her den, Constance and Demosthenes were engaged in a most curious rehearsal. At a given signal Demosthenes, with ever increasing readiness, would howl plaintively, lie on his side, roll over on his back, indulge in a brief simulation of agony, and then become perfectly still, counterfeiting excellently a dead dog. The signal was the word "Hedge," hissed sibilantly.

Yet Constance realized that the rescue of Demosthenes and the gallant stand in behalf of her father's goldfish were but a poor offset to the assaults of H. Hedge against household happiness. She unburdened her soul to Matilda.

"The wretch!" she cried. "He says Demosthenes is not efficient. All he talks is efficiency—or what he says is efficiency! Think of it, Matilda! He says he eliminated twenty-six lost motions in laying a brick pavement."

"It's improper," said Matilda.

"And he says he showed a department-store how to save eighteen minutes in delivering each parcel."

"The—the rascal!"

"And he showed them how to serve coffee and cakes in some restaurant so that they saved nearly a cent a cup."

"It's sinful."

"And something about carpet-tacks—oh, dear, I forget exactly what. Something about saving thirty-five and a fifth seconds in making each tack."

Matilda stiffened and became rigid.

"It's immoral," she affirmed earnestly.

"And—"

Constance paused for breath.

"—and he says we do not coöperate!"

"God forbid!" said Matilda.

"He— Oh, oh! I can't bear it!"

"What has he done, deary?"

"He has stopped our charge accounts!"

Matilda gasped. She did not fully realize the enormity of the offense, but it was something abhorrent to her mistress, and that was enough.

"We can't charge anything any more," wailed Constance, "unless we go to him first and tell him what we want, and have him make out a requisition. And if it costs very much we can't have it at all."

"We shall perish," said Matilda gloomily.

"He has been telephoning to all the stores, telling them they won't be paid unless we fill out regular forms. He calls it standardization."

Matilda winced and flushed. It shocked her to hear of such a horrid word in the mouth of her mistress, even though it was but a quotation.

"Standardization!" repeated Constance. "That's more efficiency. The beast!"

Down in the library, however, Hedge was peacefully oblivious to the commotion in Constance's boudoir. He was studying a photograph. He had found the picture in a drawer of the big mahogany desk. The serene, gray eyes of Constance looked out from it. Under it was written:

My little girl.

The efficiency man recognized the bold handwriting of John W. Brooke. He studied the photograph for some minutes, and finally slipped it into his pocket.

"A rather good sentiment, succinctly expressed," he observed.

But there are sentiments—*and* sentiments.

H. Hedge came upon another one. In a moment of inspiration that morning, under the burden of a thought that the Brooke children failed to coöperate in the scientific management of their domicile, he wrote on a sheet of paper:

A house divided against itself shall surely fall.

He had pinned the sheet of paper against the wall, being eminently pleased with the quotation.

When he next looked at it another line had been added, in a hand that was unfamiliar to him, yet distinctly masculine. The line read:

A house subtracted from its bank-roll has already fallen.

He folded the sheet of paper and placed it in his pocket, next to the photograph.

"Bill is trying to slip me a sarcastic remark," he mused. "But I like the old man's stuff better."

CHAPTER VIII

A QUESTION OF KEYS

IT was early morning in the living-room allotted to the servants of the Brooke household. But the efficiency man was there. He was always early. He was viewing with all the fervor of a crusader a strange engine that had been affixed to the wall.

As he stood worshiping it Mary, the cook, and Elvira, her assistant, entered, on their way to the kitchen. Of Mary it is useful to know that she had been employed in the Brooke family for eighteen years. She was a short, sturdy spinster of middle life, loyal, opinionated, bellicose on occasion. Elvira, being youthful, was less colorful.

"Ah," said H. Hedge. "I was waiting for you. Observe this. Each morning you will insert a key in this clock—so. It registers the time at which you assume your duties. Each evening, when you have ceased work, you will duplicate the operation."

"Fur the love av—"

"No," interrupted Hedge, "for the purpose of recording the exact number of hours and minutes you have worked during the day. In this way, after possibly a week, I shall be able to determine accurately just how many hours are necessary in the performance

of your duties. I shall then fix a stated schedule of hours, to which you will closely adhere."

Mary studied the clock with close attention, and then made an equally careful scrutiny of the efficiency man.

"I'll punch no clock," she said.

"But I think you will."

"I'm thinkin' ye're wrong, young man," she answered dispassionately. "Eighteen years I've wurrked for Misther Brooke, and for the missus before she died, God rest her. I punched no clock for the missus, and I'll punch none for yez. I've no time for foolishness or palaverin'. Why should I be standin' here ivery marnin', wastin' me time on a crazy clock, when there's wurrk waitin' me in the kitchen?"

"It may very easily result in reducing your hours of work," observed Hedge.

"Am I complainin' about me hours? Whose business are me hours, excipt me own? Is annybody kept waitin' for breakfast?"

"That's not the point? What I am trying to get at—"

"Don't thry," interrupted Mary. "'Tis useless. I'm a settled woman, respectable an' sober. Are ye takin' me fur wan of thim foolish facthry gurrls, with ivery spare penny goin' on their backs, that I'd be punchin' a clock marrnin', noon, an' night? An' you, Elvira—" Mary turned upon her assistant with a baleful look. "I'll have none av this nonsince, from ye, aythe r. There'll be no clock punchin' for you nor me."

Elvira was silent, but apprehensive.

"There are the keys," said the efficiency man, laying them on the table. "It's punch the clock or no pay."

"No pay!" echoed Mary, her voice rising. "Listen, me little man: I'm paid be the month, on the firrst. I'll be paid on the firrst av nixt month, if God spares me. Mr. Brooke niver—"

"As Mr. Brooke is away," broke in Hedge, "and as I am the only person in this house authorized to pay bills or wages—in fact, the only person able to—you will see the necessity of obeying my orders. I have full authority to pay, hire, and fire."

"Fire, is it?" shrilled Mary, her chin thrust forth. "You'll be firin' me, thin? Fire away, for all the good ye'll git av it! There's no man livin' excipt Misther Brooke, can fire me. Mind thot, now!"

"If you mean that you cannot be ejected from the house," remarked the efficiency man evenly, "you are quite mistaken. I should regret the necessity, of course. But I shall insist on an observance of rules."

"Rules!" repeated Mary. "Rules an' rigulations! 'Tis rule this an' rule that. 'Tis 'Walk this way, Mary; it saves shtips.' 'Tis 'Write this in a book, Mary; I must know the price av coffee an' tay.' 'Tis 'Fill out the carrd, Mary; 'tis needful fur me to keep thrack av yer conduct!' An' I'm writin' in books an' fillin' out cards whin 'tis me that should be cookin'. An' ye've got Elvira thot crazy with litherary wurrk that the dishes shtand without washin'. Thim things have I done for ye, Misther Hedge—thim things, but

no more! I'll walk in me own way as long as me ould legs carry me. An' Elvira, do ye be walkin' as the Lord intinded, dacint and contint. An' we'll punch no dommed clock."

"The clock will be punched," said Hedge. "Please remember."

An efficiency man, installed with full authority to reorganize human activities, always wins. That is one of the fundamental laws of efficiency. So it happened that H. Hedge won in the matter of the time-clock.

He was not, however, aware of his victory until eight o'clock. At that hour he was seated in the dining-room, and the three Brookes were also at table.

"You may serve, Horace," said Constance.

"Breakfast is not ready, Miss Brooke."

"Not ready?"

"Not cooked yet, miss."

The voice of Horace was unemotional, but there was a meaning in the glance he bestowed upon Hedge.

The efficiency man, without a word, rose from his place and went downstairs to the kitchen. It was empty. He ascended the back stairs and entered the servants' living-room. Just inside the door he paused and listened to the sob-choked voice of Mary.

"Thry it agin, Elvira. 'Tis shame an' sorrer an' the work av the divil, but thry! 'Tis an' hour gone now an' no kittle on the shtove. Haven't ye the thrick av it yet? Don't be answerin' me, but thry. I've

thried until me fingers are achin' an' there's no sinse in me head.

"Thry, or I'll be fired. An' 'tisn't the job I'm carin' about, but the three dear childher thot 'll be starrvin' an' perishin' for the want av a meal. An' what would Misther Brooke say, comin' back an' findin' a shtrange woman feedin' the poor darlin's?

"Thry it agin, ye fool! Are ye thot clumsy? Here; give over the key, an' I'll thry it mesilf. May the divil fly away with a clock like thot!"

But the devil did not fly away with it, despite the earnest prayer of Mary Monahan. Instead, he backed out of the room and made his way back to the dining-hall, where the three Brookes were in whispered consultation with Horace.

"Where is our breakfast?" demanded Billy, rising at the entrance of the efficiency man.

"Apparently it is on the knees of the gods," answered H. Hedge placidly.

"Are they eating it?"

Hedge ignored him and turned to the butler.

"Horace, do you understand anything about a time-clock?"

"I—er—I've seen them, sir."

"Don't say 'er'—it's meaningless."

"Very good, sir."

"Can you punch a time-clock?"

"I think so, sir."

"There is one in the servant's hall. Go out and punch it, in behalf of Mary and Elvira—for this time only. Hereafter, they will punch it themselves."

"Yes, sir."

The efficiency man took his seat at the table and smiled blandly at the three Brookes.

They did not smile at him.

"What's all this stuff about a time-clock?" demanded Billy.

"It concerns the servants."

"It concerns *us*, if we can't get anything to eat."

"Be patient."

"Patient! Say, Mr. Efficiency Engineer, I'm as patient as anybody—but I'm hungry. So is Connie. So is Alice. We want breakfast."

H. Hedge viewed Billy Brooke with a glance of ill-disguised pity.

"A little fortitude," he counseled, "is a requisite part of character. Cultivate it."

"Oh, fine! But a little breakfast has got fortitude beaten by ten lengths. I want my grub."

"Imitate your sister; she is not complaining."

Constance turned a scornful glance at the efficiency man.

Her morning gown was particularly charming; the flush in her face even surpassed it.

H. Hedge carefully noted both.

"If I omitted to complain," she said coldly, "I do so now. This is abominable!"

"And you?" inquired Hedge, turning to Alice.

"It's fierce!"

The author of the clock was in nowise dismayed at the discouraging attitude of the three Brookes.

"A slight temporary inconvenience," he said, "will

result in a permanent benefit to us all. I am putting this house on a business basis. As soon as the servants are accustomed to the new system there will not only be an absolutely prompt service of meals, but all other functions will be performed with fidelity and accuracy."

"I want my strawberries," snapped Alice.

"Prunes," corrected H. Hedge. "This is prune day."

Alice made an awful grimace.

"You're a prune yourself," she said sullenly.

"Alice!"

It was the voice of Constance, who felt that the colloquy was becoming undignified.

The entrance of Horace diverted the attention of the efficiency man.

"Did you punch the clock for Mary?" he asked.

"No, sir."

"Why not?"

"Er—I beg pardon, sir. Mary will not allow me to punch the clock, sir."

H. Hedge frowned.

"Had my orders, didn't you?"

"Yes, sir; but—"

Horace coughed and shuffled his feet.

"But what?"

"Well, sir, you see, Mary is—er—beg pardon, Mr. Hedge—but Mary—"

Horace paused again.

"I would like to ask, sir, if you are well acquainted with Mary?"

"I do not yet enjoy that honor."

"Then, sir, perhaps you will not understand. But Mary—well, Mary says she will punch the clock herself, sir, or it will not be punched at all."

"Send Mary here!"

Horace disappeared quickly.

The three Brookes exchanged glances and became expectant.

When Mary entered the dining-room her round face was moist with perspiration and her arms were folded resolutely across her ample bosom.

"Is the clock punched yet?" asked the efficiency man.

"'Tis not."

"Do you know how?"

"I do not."

"I sent Horace to punch it for you, for this morning only. He says you refused to allow him to do so."

"I did."

"Why?"

Mary took a step forward and came to a second halt. Her cold, blue eyes met the glance of the efficiency man without a quiver.

"Me little man," she said, "'tis ye thot towld me I'd be punchin' the clock mesilf. An' ag'inst the hour I punch that clock, there'll be no breakfast. The rules an' rigulations are none of my makin'. 'Tis ye yersilf invinted thim. An' I'll have no Englishman butler tellin' me how I'll be puttin' a key in a time-clock. No, nor no Eyetalian furnace-man, ayther."

H. Hedge viewed her without emotion, but the three Brookes were displaying lively interest.

"I did not ask Giovanni to help you," remarked the efficiency man.

"An' 'tis mercy for him. I've done me own wurrk in this house for eighteen years, Misther Hedge, an' no odds from annybody since I had the lumbago, three winters gone. 'Tis not me put the clock in the house. But if it has to be punched, I'll do me own punchin'. Mind ye thot. I'm an independent woman, sor. Divil a punch goes into thot clock for Mary but I do it mesilf."

"But I heard you trying to get Elvira to do it."

"Ay, the poor fool. 'Twas useless. I'll ask her no more. From now till the day av judgmint, Misther Hedge, I'm—I'm—be the saints, I'm scientific!"

Mary placed her hands on her hips and awaited a reply.

"But we're hungry, Mary," said Alice plaintively.

"Ye poor darlin', av coorse y' are! But 'tis not me can do annything for ye. The days av me cookin' is over, deary; I'm a clock-puncher. An' whin I'm not punchin' clocks, I'm writin' in books. An' whin I'm not writin' in books, I'm shteppin' forward an' back, like a dancin'-master.

"'Tis science. We're undher rigulations now, deary. Do ye mind the eggs I cooked yistherday? They wint on the scales firrst. There's no more poachin' two eggs for Miss Alice. I'm poachin' four ounces. That's science, darrlin' dear.

"An' there's no more coffee made in the ould pot.

342336B

No, indade! 'Tis dribled out of a new-fangled Rooshian machine, so many minutes to so many ounces, with Elvira holdin' the watch. An' thot's science. An' between whiles, whin we know how, we're to run an' punch the clock. Science!"

H. Hedge rose from his chair.

"Once more I'll show you how to punch the clock," he said.

"Please let him show you, Mary," said Constance hastily. "We are really very hungry."

"The poor, famished sweetheart!" exclaimed Mary contritely. Then with look of scorn for the efficiency man: "Here's the key, thin. Show me!"

H. Hedge took the key and examined it.

"Have you been trying to punch the clock with this key?" he demanded.

"This hour gone," replied Mary stonily.

"But this is Giovanni's key."

"Well, the Eyetalian sassanach! Lave me at him!"

"Oh, probably an innocent mistake," said H. Hedge. "He undoubtedly took your key by mistake and left you his."

"Mistake, is it? 'Tis the last mistake, thin. I'll have no Eyetalian punchin' in as cook whilst I'm in this house. An', be all the powers, I'll feed no furrnace, ayther!"

The swiftness of Mary's exit was surprising, and it was all that H. Hedge could do to keep pace with her. Twenty minutes later there was breakfast in the dining-room. The three Brookes were so hungry that even Alice ate her prunes.

CHAPTER IX

BUYING A HAT

"HOW do I get some gasoline?" demanded Billy Brooke, bearding the lion in the library jungle.

The efficiency man reached for a large volume and turned deftly to a page. Then he thrust a hand into a drawer and drew forth a blue-printed slip. It had a serial number in the upper left hand corner.

"Fill that out," he said tersely. "I'll show you how."

Billy took the slip wonderingly and reached for a pen.

"Date it," said H. Hedge.

Billy obeyed.

"Now write, '102 — dash — TW — dash — XXX.' Got it?"

Billy exhibited the slip.

"Let's see—102—TW—XXX. Correct. How many gallons?"

"Oh, about twenty."

"Try ten, for a starter. How many miles are you getting to a gallon?"

"Search me. I never noticed."

H. Hedge looked at Billy with a pained expression in his eyes.

"Well, I want you to take particular notice hereafter. Begin to-day. If it runs less than fifteen miles to the gallon, the subway will be a lot cheaper. Put down ten gallons."

Billy scowled, but he put down ten.

"Now sign it."

The signature was hastily scrawled.

"What do I do with this?" demanded Billy.

"Leave it with me. I'll take care of it."

"But when do I get the gas?"

"Probably to-morrow."

"*To-morrow!* Man, I want it now!"

"Sorry. But I cannot have my system disarranged."

"Oh, it's a system, is it?" sneered Billy. "That's all we get nowadays—system. We're living on a time-table and we report in writing. If anybody breaks a teacup, they write a book about it, and then you file the book away in a drawer and index it. And say—what's 102—TW—XXX, anyhow?"

"That's gasoline."

"Gee! No wonder the stuff is going up. Why can't I just write down 'gas, ten'?"

"Because I have standardized all purchases, and because 102—TW—XXX happens to represent the classification and serial number of gasoline. It's exceedingly simple."

"Oh, exceedingly!" echoed Billy. "But I haven't a pint of gas left, and what am I going to do to-day?"

"Walk."

Billy walked out of the library with his big fists

clenched and borrowed two dollars from Alice. He was leaving the house when Constance met him.

"Did you get your gasoline all right?" she asked.

"Oh, sure," he told her. "He's got a great system. It's dead easy."

Constance did not detect the irony in her brother's voice. She noted only the words, and they kindled hope in her breast. If Billy could get gasoline—well, watch her.

"I require a hat," she informed H. Hedge, when she had sought him out. "How is it arranged, please?"

The efficiency man reached for his large book and turned to "Hats."

" 'Hats—women's,' " he read, as his finger reached the subdivision. "What kind of a woman's hat? Straw?"

"In December?" she inquired, icily.

"Plush?"

She shivered.

"Then please tell me exactly what you desire in the way of a hat."

"I do not know."

H. Hedge sat back in his chair and regarded her with astonishment.

"You mean to say that you want a hat, but you do not know what kind?"

"Certainly! How can I tell what I want until I have seen them? Did you ever buy a woman's hat?"

"No; I admit that I never did. Yet there should be no difficulty about it that I can see."

Constance smiled faintly. It seemed that the oracle did not know all things, at any rate.

"I shall probably visit ten or a dozen shops," she observed evenly.

"Oh, that's all right. I've sent copies of the purchase-list to all firms with which we maintain accounts."

She winced at the "we."

"What I want to get at is the type of hat, the grade, or whatever the customary description."

Constance considered.

"Well," she said. "I shall probably buy a small hat, and very likely it will have fur on it. In a general way, it will probably be a toque."

The efficiency man ran rapidly through a list, and made a memorandum.

"Price?" he asked briskly.

"I haven't the least idea."

Again he was amazed.

"But you must have *some* idea. Two dollars? Three dollars?"

"Two *dollars!*"

"Just a second. Yes; here it is! 'Women's fur caps, $2.19,'" he read.

"I am *not* buying a cap, and I do not care to be insulted," declared Constance. "I am buying a hat, h-a-t, hat!"

"I understand. Now if you will only specify prices as accurately as you spell, we will have this done promptly."

He glanced up at the delicately wrought handiwork

which at that moment crowned her soft brown hair, and then pointed at it irreverently, with a lead-pencil.

"What did that cost?"

Constance touched it lightly, as if for identification.

"Really, I don't recall," she answered indifferently.

"Approximately?"

"Oh, perhaps a hundred."

"One hundred dollars!"

"Surely. Something like that. It came from the Luxembourg shop."

H. Hedge studied the hat with interest. He even committed the sacrilege of rising from his seat, leaning over and feeling the texture of it with his fingers.

"Do you mean to tell me that you paid one hundred dollars for that thing?"

She stifled her anger and merely nodded.

"I might add that my father paid the bill—and asked no questions."

"How long ago?"

"I think it was about three weeks ago."

"A hundred for a hat, and a new one in three weeks?" he exclaimed.

"The season has changed," she explained sweetly.

"I recall only four seasons in a year," observed the efficiency man abruptly.

"In a year—possibly," conceded Constance. "But not in hats."

He devoted five seconds to thought.

"Probably, if you buy hats so frequently, you have one that you purchased in the corresponding season last year. If so, in what condition is it?"

"It was probably given to my maid long ago. Really, do you propose to persist in being utterly impossible?"

"Not at all. On the contrary, I am very glad to have this matter of hats brought up. I can see that it merits attention. Really, Miss Brooke, I do not want you to misunderstand me."

The efficiency man paused for an instant to give emphasis to his words.

"I desire your coöperation in all things, including hats. I am not in the least unreasonable; I am merely trying to apply business principles in a new field. I am sure that you will assist me. Now, as to hats, I may say that I never pay more than five dollars for my own, usually less. Assuming, for argument, that I pay five, I can buy twenty hats for a hundred dollars. It would probably take me five years to consume twenty hats. The hat which you are now wearing, while different in style from my own, is nevertheless obviously less durable, both in design and material. I cannot see that it is an efficient hat, while I already know that it is not an economic hat.

"Let us be reasonable. I will make an exception in this case, which I do not think justifies another hat for a period of nine or ten weeks. I will give you a requisition for a new hat now."

He smiled at her in a friendly way. Constance held her breath.

"But I shall specify that the hat is not to cost more than five dollars."

She arose slowly from her chair and faced him.

"Are you serious?" she asked in a low tone.

"Oh, quite."

The bitter moments of life are visited upon the rich and poor alike. Constance knew that she was poor—very poor.

"I—I shall go about in tatters," she said brokenly. "I shall wear my old hat!"

The efficiency man looked at the old hat and liked it. The thought occurred to him that Constance and the hat had been created for each other. There was a beautiful harmony that appealed to him, which was testimony to the fact that art was not wholly dead within him. Nevertheless he did not care to be looked upon wholly as a person who pinched pennies and bit nickels. Efficiency was more than mere saving. Nor did he think it right for Constance to go in tatters, although he could easily believe that she would probably ornament them. Here was a chance to kill two birds with one stone.

"See here, Miss Brooke," he said. "I am going to demonstrate something to you. It will be an object lesson in efficiency. You say that a proper hat cannot be bought for five dollars, hence you are in the habit of paying a hundred. I differ. I say that a proper hat can also be an economical hat. You are going to get a new hat."

"But—"

"Wait, please."

He seized the telephone and called a number.

"Is this the Luxembourg shop? Very well. This is the residence of Mr. John W. Brooke. Please send

up an assortment of hats for Miss Brooke to examine. Of course, all kinds of hats. And send them up right away. In half an hour? Make it twenty minutes, if possible. Yes; that's all."

He turned to Constance as he hung up the receiver, and smiled.

"I'll show you how to buy a hat," he said. "I'll send for you, Miss Brooke, as soon as the hats arrive."

Constance walked out in a daze. He was going to buy an economical hat—and he had telephoned to Luxembourg! She whistled softly and wrinkled her forehead in perplexity. Oh, well, there was nothing to do but wait. But she was intensely curious.

Half an hour later H. Hedge summoned her to the library. There were many hat-boxes there, under the chaperonage of two young women whose own hats identified them as eminently qualified for their duties.

"We are ready to examine hats," he said briskly, pushing aside his work and nodding at the hat custodians.

The first hat was large and of a profuse richness. The efficiency man shook his head at once.

"But at least I may try it on," exclaimed Constance.

He shrugged his shoulders and she tried it on, surveying the effect in a mirror.

"It's exquisite," murmured one of the saleswomen. "It possesses the proper coloring for *mademoiselle.*"

"That's where you're off," snapped H. Hedge. "It's the wrong color entirely. Next hat."

The next two also were large, and it was apparent at a glance that the efficiency man disapproved of them.

Large hats, he knew, ran into large bills. But he submitted to watching the hat placed upon Constance's head. She frowned at the result, and he checked a smile of satisfaction. She, too, knew it was expensive —he was proving his case.

Followed a succession of hats, which, to the efficiency man, were plainly constructed to sell by acreage. He was patient, however. Constance could try them on, if she wished—but she could not buy. He had committed himself to a hat to prove one of the truths of economy and efficiency, but he was steadfast against extravagance.

"No small hats?" he asked finally.

"But yes, indeed," said the second saleswoman. "Some that are exquisite."

"Trot 'em out, please."

There was a very pretty parade of small hats, but at nearly all of them H. Hedge merely shook his head. He was not to be deceived; he recognized the high cost of living when he saw it. They bore all the outward evidence of sky prices. Constance appeared pleased with some of them, and sighed when she read his steady disapproval.

At last he became impatient, and began diving into boxes himself. Three hats he tossed aside carelessly, bringing exclamation of dismay from the young ladies of the Luxembourg. Then, suddenly, he was all business.

"Here were are," he said. "Put this on."

It was the tiniest hat of all, a mere bit of velvet. Not a stitch of trimming, not a solitary ornament

graced it. It was almost Quakerish in its simplicity. Yet, as Constance placed it on her head, it suddenly assumed a rakish little air of its own, so that it became more than a hat—it was a saucy sentiment.

"Like that?" he demanded.

Constance did like it. Anybody would have liked it, because of the sheer pertness and mischief of the thing. But she was canny. She merely shrugged her shoulders.

"It is exquisite!" said the first saleswoman.

"It seems they all are," remarked the efficiency-man dryly. "How about your opinion, Miss Brooke?"

"It is not bad," she said reluctantly. "But—"

Her glance wandered toward the discarded creations. H. Hedge shook his head promptly.

"Too high-priced, the rest of that stuff. Now, this hat is reasonable. Anybody can see it's cheap. Yet it's a good hat. It's durable, simple, and doesn't carry any circus spangles. Does it fit? What is it—a seven?"

One of the Luxembourg ladies was about to break into vivid speech when Constance checked her with a glance.

"The hat fits quite well," she said gravely.

"I thought so. Want it?"

"Why—I believe so—with your consent, of course."

"All right. How much is it?"

"We have not the prices," said the chief saleswoman. "They were not sent up with the hats. But if *monsieur*—"

"Never mind. Monsieur can tell a cheap hat when

he sees it, likewise a strongly built hat. Miss Brooke buys this hat. Tell them to send up the bill. 'Phone me, by the way, as I want to get it in my records to-day and send the regular requisition. Now, you can bundle up all that millionaire stuff and sell it to the easy-marks. Good day."

The two ladies from the Luxembourg put the extravagant hats back in the boxes, while Constance hurried up to her rooms. She planted herself before a mirror and made a short speech to the hat.

"You little dear!" she exclaimed softly. "I love you for being so plain and simple and *cheap*. And I'm so glad they sent up all the other horrid ones. But—oh, I'm afraid something is going to happen. But he *bought* you; he said so. And I won't give you up. I'm going to make sure of you by wearing you—right now! We're going out for a walk, little hat—just you and I. Come—let's hurry!"

While Constance and her little hat went for a walk, H. Hedge was grinning in satisfaction.

"It's not going to be such an awful job to put economy and efficiency across on this house, after all," he mused. "Miss Brooke has just learned an important lesson. Took it sensibly, too. That girl has a head on her shoulders, if she'll only use it."

Twenty minutes later the telephone rang.

"Oh, it's the Luxembourg, is it? All right. Yes, I took that small hat. It's what? Oh, I don't care anything about the model being exclusive. That stuff is all rot, anyhow. No, and I don't care whether it's from Paris or Pittsburgh. That's more rot, too. Just

send the bill, and let me have the amount now. What?"

H. Hedge's dark hair bristled.

"Say that again! What?

He had started to write a memorandum, but his fingers trembled.

"A hundred and fifty dollars! Cut that out! I didn't buy *all* the hats—just one! The *little* one!"

He swallowed hard and listened again.

"That was the most *expensive* hat in the bunch? Paris—exclusive? And a hundred and fifty! Say, are you a milliner or a burglar? Wait! Hold the wire!"

He raced out into the hall and bumped into Matilda.

"Where is Miss Brooke?" he demanded.

"She went for a walk a few minutes ago."

"Did—did she wear a new hat?"

"She did," answered Matilda stonily.

H. Hedge gulped, wiped his forehead, and walked slowly back to the library. The receiver off the telephone hook attracted his attention. He picked it up gingerly.

"Send up your bill," he said. "What? Why, certainly! I know a hat when I see one."

Then he sat down heavily and began marking aimlessly on a pad. But the marks gradually assumed the form of letters:

STUNG

CHAPTER X

EFFICIENT DANCING

BILLY had been crisscrossing the floor nervously, with his hands deep in his pockets. The outbreak alarmed Alice, while it inspired astonishment in Constance. Normally, Billy was easy-going.

"Oh, it's all right for you to smile, Connie," he said savagely. "You worked him good and plenty, but only because he didn't know it. A fool hat is one thing, and gasoline is something else. But it isn't that so much, either. I don't care if I never get anything out of him. It's the talk."

"What talk?" asked Constance hastily.

"Oh, these good old friends of the family—the rubber-neck crowd. I've been out a bit to-day. I'm hearing the gossip. You told me not to say anything, so I couldn't explain. But they're all asking questions about E. E., and every one of 'em has different dope."

"What are they saying?"

"Everything! One line of talk is that father has picked up some favorite nephew and made him a protégé and taken out guardianship papers."

"He doesn't need a guardian," remarked Alice with a shake of her head. "He needs a keeper and a padded cell."

"There's another yarn that this guy is a British nobleman," continued Billy, ignoring his younger sister; " that he is a house guest for an indefinite time, and that maybe he'll be a son-in-law."

Constance flushed vividly.

"How absolutely absurd!" she exclaimed.

"I'm only giving you what they say," declared her brother wrathfully. "Another one has it that he's a classmate of mine who is just back from South America, where he's been on a ranch. And—get this —there's another yarn out that E. E. is a famous portrait-painter who's putting the whole family on canvas. They've gone so far with that that Alice is already painted, and I'm going to be exhibited next spring. They're going to call it 'Girl With Fan,' or something like that."

"O-oh!" cried Alice. "That sounds rather nice. But why do they always give such funny names to portraits?"

"They name them after the accessory," observed Constance in a wise tone.

"The accessory after the fact," added Billy sarcastically. "Well, that's not all, either. It seems there's another story that E. E. is a detective who is guarding us from the Black Hand, while the old man is in hiding. Imagine the old man hiding from anything! And—here's the limit—some of them are passing it around that father is quarantined on the top floor along with some strange disease, and that this boob here is a noted specialist in nervous diseases,

who is treating him at a dollar a minute, or something like that."

"It's unbearable," declared Constance.

"Unspeakable," affirmed Alice.

"Well, it'll end any time you say," said Billy, coming to a halt and indulging in an emphatic gesture.

Alice displayed alert interest.

"I don't understand," said Constance. "You mean that you have a plan? You have some way to end it?"

"Sure. I've had one from the first. Only you've been going into arguments with him."

The son of John W. Brooke spoke with assurance and ease.

"The plan, please," said Constance.

"Chuck him."

"How?"

"Me."

Billy stretched lazily and glanced down at his own considerable bulk.

"You propose to tell him to leave the house?"

"*Tell* him? Not for a minute. Why tell him? Just put him out; that's all."

Alice looked at her big brother and betrayed excitement.

"Really, Billy?" she exclaimed.

"Why not? Any reason why it cannot be done? You two have been beating around the bush with your schemes, when there's only one easy way. And it's so darned simple. I suppose that's the reason you never thought of it."

He viewed his sisters magnanimously.

Constance pursed her lips and considered the idea. Beyond question it was necessary to terminate the dictatorship. Argument and compromise had failed. Yet Constance instinctively revolted at anything so vulgar as the employment of force. It was something unknown in the Brooke household; something foreign and distasteful. Still, the situation was also new and unknown since the day she could first remember anything.

"I'm for it," declared Alice promptly. "Will you really do it, Billy?"

"Watch me."

"How about you, Connie?"

"Well," said Constance cautiously, "I'll watch—if he'll do it."

"Come on."

Billy stretched again and led the way to the library. In his heart there were no misgivings. The only son of John W. Brooke was not a coward. A certain youthful irresolution may have often dominated him, but there was nothing craven in his nature. He was big and well conditioned. He had played a bit of scrub football, and had taken his hard knocks without showing yellow. The mere prospect of physical combat never dismayed him. Perhaps he was something of a braggart; but that was youth again.

It seemed inevitable that the efficiency man should be at his desk. He did not even glance up at the procession, being too busy reviewing buff-colored reports which dealt largely with the perversities of the time-clock.

"We've decided this can't go on," announced Billy abruptly.

Hedge looked up, after he had carefully checked off the report of Giovanni, the furnace-man.

"What can't go on?"

"You."

"Oh!"

For an instant it seemed that the conversation might terminate at that point. But Billy faltered for only a few seconds.

"You've got to get out," he said, with the necessary glare.

Alice slipped a nervous hand into her sister's.

"What for?" The curiosity in Hedge's voice was unmistakable.

"Because we won't stand for this business any more," answered Billy.

"What business?"

Billy Brooke glowered, which signifies more than mere glaring. The efficiency man did neither. He merely looked and appeared to be interested.

"Oh, there's going to be no argument about it," growled Billy. "Now, you get your hat and beat it. It's all off."

"Too busy," remarked H. Hedge, picking up another report-card.

"Going?" demanded Billy.

"Not yet."

"When?"

Constance flinched. She sensed something incongruous in the question. It did not coördinate with the

great plan. Yet Billy stood firm as a rock, and quite as imposing.

"Not until your father returns," remarked the efficiency man.

Billy coughed noisily and glanced at his sisters. He smiled significantly.

"Give you one minute," he announced.

"And then?"

"Out you go."

"How?"

"Front door."

"Who?"

"Me!"

The admirable brevity of the dialogue was not lost upon H. Hedge, who nodded approvingly as he stood up. There was the utmost friendliness in his eyes. He was not so tall as Billy by something like two inches; nor was he so heavy by a considerable number of pounds. He did not betray any marked evidences of preparedness. Beyond question there was no anger in him.

"Well," he said slowly, "I presume that ends discussion."

"You bet."

The efficiency man sighed.

"All right," he murmured. "Go to it."

Still there was no sign of preparedness in him, unless you looked at his eyes. They were quite calm, too, which was an odd contrast to something else that was visible therein. It was a sort of battle calm; a rather fine demonstration of the principle of light

without heat. Constance, always a quick reader, saw it and unconsciously squeezed Alice's hand.

Billy advanced a step, then paused. The situation was unfamiliar to him, and somewhat disconcerting. He was not afraid of H. Hedge. If the pair of them had been on the street, or anywhere save under the Brooke roof-tree, there would have been no cause for hesitation. But now that he was face to face with physical combat, Billy hesitated.

After all, the efficiency man was in the nature of a guest. He was an unwelcome guest, to be sure; but none the less, the innate hospitality of the Brooke family and the traditions of the household accorded him a certain immunity. It was not a custom of the Brookes to throw their guests bodily into the street.

"Look here," said Billy, "I don't want to muss you up any. You'd better go quietly."

H. Hedge simply shook his head.

"You don't want my sisters to see a fight, do you?"

"No. But we might ask them to retire."

Constance and Alice showed no disposition to quit the library.

"It comes right down to this," blurted Billy angrily. "You put me in a position where I've got to throw somebody out of the house, and you've got no business to put me there. When you're not wanted, you ought to have decency enough to go."

"I'm not here for my health or amusement," remarked the efficiency man. "I'm here on business. I'm sent here by your father. I'm here till he returns,

and by his orders. Naturally, I'm going to stay. While I do not believe in corporal punishment, nevertheless, if you compel me, I—"

He broke off with a shrug and regarded Billy with a calm stare.

"Well," said Billy, taking another step forward, "let's see who goes out the front door first."

As if to make ready for the exit, there was a tempestuous ringing of the front door-bell, which was answered with alacrity by Horace. A sound of voices and laughter echoed from the hall.

Constance laid a restraining hand on Billy's arm.

"S-sh!" she whispered. "Company. Maudie Van Nest, I think, and some of the boys and girls. Call it off, Billy."

Billy paused reluctantly. He was eager for the encounter, yet his eagerness was mixed with a feeling of relief that it was not yet necessary to eject a guest from the Brooke mansion.

"You'd better go up and pack your stuff," he advised the efficiency man. "Some friends have come, and that lets you out for a while."

H. Hedge nodded and returned to his desk, where he reached for the day-book and resumed his work.

The Brookes' callers lost no time in taking possession of the house. From his desk, the efficiency man could hear Constance playing a piano across the hall to an accompaniment of swiftly moving feet. At times, when the piano was not in action, the phonograph took up the relief work.

It was while the phonograph was playing and Con-

stance was swiftly whirling with the Van Nest boy that the latter asked in a casual tone:

"Who's your friend?"

She followed the direction of his glance and saw, at the threshold of the room, the quiet figure of H. Hedge. He was watching her.

Constance missed a step, something that was foreign to her custom, and that did not serve to improve her temper. The Van Nest boy had not recovered from his astonishment at the error when the efficiency man advanced across the room.

"One moment, please," he said.

The dancing couple stopped; so did three other couples, one of which was composed of two girls dancing together.

Hedge included them all in a brief bow, then gave his entire attention to Constance.

"What is the dance?"

Constance, surprised out of speech by the intrusion, turned appealingly to the Van Nest youth.

"Partly a fox," drawled that person, "with a few steps of my own."

"You invented them?" inquired Hedge.

"I guess so. Don't remember exactly; I dance quite a bit."

"It doesn't matter. The point I wish to make is, why do you waste so many steps?"

"*Waste* 'em?"

Constance's partner was a puzzled young man. "Who ever heard of a wasted dancing step?"

"Exactly. Waste them. I have been watching you

dance. You start in a given direction, and you proceed so many steps in a straight line. Very good. Then there is a pause, which, for purposes of rest, is undoubtedly permissible. Upon resuming progress, however, you then move in a sidewise direction—four steps—after which you continue the forward motion. You will readily see that those four steps are wholly unnecessary, consume an additional length of time, and bring about a delay in reaching the other end of the room."

Constance was flushing hotly and biting her lower lip. The Van Nest boy was standing with his mouth open. A small circle of curious young people had assembled itself round the trio, studying the efficiency man with wide eyes. Presently Wally Van Nest recovered speech.

"But say," he protested, "those side steps are part of the dance. Don't you understand?"

"Very well. Grant that. But why four? Why not two? You obtain exactly the same effect, that of moving crabwise, with fifty per cent. of the effort. I will illustrate. Allow me, Miss Brooke."

And before Constance could move, the efficiency man stepped forward, bowed deferentially, and slipped an arm about her waist. A second later the ring of observers opened for them, and they glided rapidly forward across the floor. With Constance, the maneuver was purely automatic and involuntary. She was in a whirl of rage and confusion, but her feet moved with mechanical obedience to long training. She wanted to stop, but could not.

Eight steps forward they moved, H. Hedge with a mind wholly concentrated upon his work and executing his plans with the precision of a field marshal. They came to a pause.

"To the left, two," he commanded quietly.

Constance found herself obeying; but upon the completion of the second step, wholly from force of habit, she attempted to take a third. She was firmly but not roughly checked by a surprisingly strong arm. In the mere fraction of a second she could feel the muscles of the efficiency man tighten like cords of steel.

"Forward!" he commanded.

So they went forward again.

"I said two steps, not four," he told her quietly. "Now—again."

Once more the hateful demonstration of scientific dancing was repeated. And after that again and again. From rage and confusion, Constance's mind turned to astonishment. H. Hedge danced very well. To be sure, his conception of the artistic was absurd and impossible; yet what he did at all was done perfectly. She could not but marvel at it.

"Thank you; that will be sufficient," he said abruptly, as they reached the center of the room again.

Constance, upon being released, fell back a step and stared at him in bewilderment.

"Better, wasn't it?" he asked. "Same principle exactly, but reduced to an economic basis."

He encompassed the youthful audience with his

glance, and then looked significantly at the hostess. She remembered herself.

"Let me present Mr. Hedge," she said coldly.

He stepped forward and shook hands with each person; just one firm shake apiece—no superfluous sawing of the air. There was a sneer on the face of the Van Nest boy. The Hollander and Morrison youths were grinning in a puzzled fashion. As for the girls, it was obvious that the efficiency man was a thing of interest.

Millie Mintern could think of no reason in the world why she should not smile at him; so she did—charmingly. H. Hedge interpreted it unerringly.

"If you please," he said, advancing.

"I should be delighted," said Millie.

She was, too. There was a certainty and sureness about efficiency dancing that interested her. It was a trifle abrupt, perhaps; a little too precise. Yet it was new—different. And she felt quite secure in the firm grip of the dark-haired stranger.

After Millie, the efficiency man found other cases to be disposed of. There was Clara Cushing, for instance; and after Clara there was Maudie Van Nest, who possessed none of her brother's disdain. And then came Hildegarde Forrest and Marion Johnston and Florrie Richmond.

Florrie even requested an extra lesson, for what possible reason Constance could not understand. In the first place, Florence was a natural dancer, and could "follow" anybody in a dance that was utterly strange to her. In the second place, she had had

the benefit of watching five previous demonstrations, and knew, of course, exactly what to do. In the third place, she swung herself into the spirit of economic dancing at the very first turn to the left, proving that she really needed no instruction at all. And yet she insisted that it should be done all over again.

It was, therefore, not without justification that Constance was annoyed at Florrie. Why should such a ridiculous proceeding be prolonged? Why should Florrie, whom everybody conceded to be pretty, find so much to laugh about? Why should H. Hedge smile over a very dull and monotonous matter? Constance found herself in front of one of the large mirrors, and unconsciously made a study of her image. She could not see anything the matter with it. As for the gown, she knew that was all right.

The voice of the efficiency man called her out of a dissatisfied reverie.

"Thank you," he was saying. "Glad to have been of service. Call on me any time. Thank you, Miss Brooke."

He bowed and walked briskly out of the room, not deviating by a hair's breadth from the shortest possible route.

"And who," demanded Millie Mintern, as he stroke from sight, "is Mr. Hedge?"

Constance hesitated. The temptation to expose the true character of the efficiency monster was great. In two sentences she could hold him up to public scorn. They were trembling on her lips. But the hesitation gave time for a rally of caution. The pride of the

Brookes was still a cherished possession. There was something more than that, too. A guest under the Brooke roof-tree, even unbidden and unwanted, was still a guest.

"Mr. Hedge," said Constance, "is a business representative of father's."

"Not the—housekeeper!"

Constance turned a level glance upon Hildegarde.

"Housekeeper? Certainly not!" she said.

"But I thought you told mama—"

"Your mother surely misunderstood me," interrupted Constance. "Mr. Hedge is in charge of some of my father's business affairs."

This, however, was a mere identification of H. Hedge. It did not explain him in the least to the Brookes' circle of friends. It went abroad that he was queer, and that was a report that Constance did not wholly relish. He was queer enough, Heaven knew; but for reasons—perhaps family pride, for one—she did not care to have him famed for that alone.

CHAPTER XI

FRIENDS OF THE FAMILY

TRUE efficiency is an octopus, reaching out in all directions and seizing upon all things. It came to pass that it seized upon Wally Van Nest on the very evening of the day that H. Hedge had applied economy to dancing.

Wally had called upon Constance. He was something of a bore, but Constance was even willing to be bored. Anything that was a relaxation from efficiency was welcome, and Wally was that very thing.

He was a mild, drab young man, with an excellent family tree on his mother's side and a mastodonic income on his father's. This happy combination of virtues gave Wally a well-defined standing in the "set," although it was the only definite thing about him—except his dancing.

"Absurd—eh?" said Wally.

"What?" inquired Constance, turning her head to yawn, although Wally would not have interpreted it.

"That—er—dancing. What does he call it—efficient? Awfully ridiculous."

"Um—I don't see why."

"Really, now? Why, it's so—er—so out of form, you know."

Constance was perfectly willing to criticize H.

Hedge's dancing—herself. But she experienced a faint and inexplicable resentment when Wally did so.

"I'm not a slave to form," she said pointedly.

"What? Oh, truly, now?"

"I am fond of the unusual," she added.

Wally pondered that for half a minute, and indicated with a shake of his head that he gave it up.

"Why, Wally, I could almost be fond of you," she added with a wicked glance.

"Oh, I say, now! But I'm not a bit unusual, really, you know. Father says—"

Horace, the butler, entered the music-room and made a respectful obeisance to Wally.

"Mr. Hedge's compliments, sir," said Horace; "and will you see him for a moment in the library?"

Hedge had not sent his compliments, but Horace was a trained servant. Constance was left staring and wrinkling her forehead.

She waited in the music-room five minutes, ten, fifteen. She was becoming annoyed. Presently she rang for Horace.

"Is Mr. Van Nest still in the library?" she asked.

"No, Miss Brooke. He left the house."

"Gone!"

"Yes, Miss Brooke."

"I don't understand."

Horace coughed and volunteered no explanation.

"I'll see if Mr. Hedge knows," she observed grimly, rising from the music-stool.

"You say he is in the library? Very well; I'll—No; I won't. Ask Mr. Hedge to come here, Horace."

There were still fragments of dignity to be preserved. Horace went away and returned.

"Mr. Hedge says he is too busy, Miss Brooke."

Constance dismissed the butler. Then she tore a handkerchief to shreds. And then she went to the library.

The efficiency man was coldly chiding Alice concerning a school report, and Alice was receiving the criticism in stony silence. She was listening only because she had been told that if she refused to receive her lecture there would be no allowance check in the morning.

She needed $1.66 quite badly.

Constance heard only the conclusion and saw her sister dismissed with a curt nod. Then Hedge turned to her and signified that she had his complete attention.

"You sent for Mr. Van Nest while he was calling on me," she began. "I have been informed that he left the house. Do you know the reason?"

"Yes."

"May I ask the reason?"

"Certainly. I told him to leave."

"You *told* him?"

"Of course. I do not consider him a proper person to enter this house."

Constance swayed and her cheeks flamed.

"Understand me," said Hedge politely. "I do not mean that he is an improper in the ordinary sense. I do not regard him as dangerous. He is merely useless, futile, a waste of time. He has no place in economy, domestic, social or otherwise."

Constance opened her lips to speak, but no words came.

"Such being the case," continued the efficiency man, "I am amazed that you dared to bring that person into the house."

"Dared!" she echoed.

"Yes. But what astonishes me even more was the fact that he dared to call. You see, the first time I met him was this afternoon. I took pains before he left to tell him never to come again. He disobeyed me. However, I do not think he will do so again. If he should forget himself, Horace has his orders."

Constance fought back a desire to scream.

"Do I understand that *you* take the liberty of deciding what persons shall enter this house?" she demanded.

"It is not a liberty; it is my business."

"You insult me!"

"Far from it. I went to the pains, on the occasion I first saw him, of sparing you any embarrassment. I should have dismissed him on sight. Instead I awaited an opportunity to see him alone, as he was leaving."

"I will receive whom I please!" stormed Constance.

"No, Miss Brooke. You will receive whom *I* please."

There was absolute horror in her eyes.

"Please be assured that, in a general way," he added quickly, "I do not criticize your friends. It is only an odd one, here and there. I have far less trouble in your case than in the case of your brother. Apparently you exercise a better natural judgment; I

cannot call it a trained judgment. In passing, I will say that I do not think young Mr. Witherbee will annoy you again."

Only the night before Mr. Witherbee, a pale blond who suffered from a musical hallucination, had been a caller at the house.

"You told him—"

"Not in person. I had no opportunity, except in your presence. Of course, I had no desire to embarrass you. I sent him a postal card this morning."

"A postal card!"

"One cent, you see. A letter costs two cents. We must be consistent in our economies."

Constance felt that she was losing her reason.

"A postal card!" she screamed. "That everybody can read!"

The efficiency man shrugged his shoulders to indicate that it was a matter of no importance.

"Oh! Oh! I shall go mad!"

"I think not, Miss Brooke. Possibly Mr. Witherbee will, but that might be rather desirable, inasmuch as it would probably lead to his confinement. However, I have no ill will for him."

"I will not submit!" shrieked Constance.

The efficiency man arose and glanced at his watch.

"You—you let my brother have his friends here, and I—"

"That is just exactly what I was going to see about, Miss Brooke. Your brother is entertaining some friends upstairs. I am about to drop in on them."

Constance could have bitten off her tongue. She felt that she had betrayed Billy.

"It's all right," he said, reading her thoughts. "I was going up anyhow. I knew they were here."

He left Constance in the library, dumb over the misfortunes of the Brooke family.

Outside the door of Billy's room H. Hedge paused for only an instant, then knocked twice and entered without waiting for a summons.

There were five young men seated at a table, and one of them was Billy Brooke. It was apparent that none of them had heard the knock, and also that they were still oblivious of the presence of a visitor.

"You'll have to come again," Billy said airily, as he pushed two blue checks toward the center of the table. "Mine are still looking healthy."

"And then some," said a slender youth who sat at his left. As he spoke, he nonchalantly shoved four blue chips away from his stack.

"I'll trot," murmured his neighbor.

"Here, too."

"I'm dead."

Billy added two chips to the pot and picked up the pack.

"Cards," he yawned.

"Help the rest," declared the slender youth wearily. "These'll do me."

"Ouch! Gimme three," said his neighbor, scowling.

"Just the top one," said the next.

The efficiency man had his eyes on Billy, who tossed

aside the deck and indicated that he was satisfied with his own portion.

The four young men who had stayed in were presently reduced to two, Billy and the slender one. After two raises, Billy called.

"Mine are all pink," observed the slender one in a bored voice.

"Thirty days and a pair of typewriters," drawled Billy, facing his hand and reaching for the pot.

H. Hedge stepped forward into the room and coughed. Five young men looked up from their labors and eyed him in astonishment.

"Gambling is not permitted in this house," he said pleasantly.

The guests looked at Billy, who arose and faced the intruder.

"Why not?" he demanded.

"From what little I know of the matter," remarked H. Hedge, "I take it you have been playing poker. Poker is gambling. It is a game of chance, which involves an interchange of money without valuable consideration being given. It is an extravagance and a waste of time. It has no place in scientific economy. Hence, it has no place here. Gentlemen, I am confident that Horace will supply you with your hats and coats downstairs."

"Here—you can't treat my friends this way!" blurted Billy.

"An error. I can. I regret the necessity—but I hereby do."

"We'll play poker whenever we want to."

"No gambling," I said.

Billy took a step in the direction of the efficiency man. Two of his guests arose and intervened.

"Never mind, Billy," said one. "We'll go. No use to make a fuss here. Come on over to my house, the whole crowd."

They filed solemnly downstairs, Billy lingering to glare at his oppressor.

"That's a fine trick to play on a man's friends," he growled. "Turn 'em out of his house."

"Are you going with them, to resume your gambling?" inquired H. Hedge pointedly.

"You bet I am."

"Then permit me to observe, much as I deplore games of chance, that if you keep on under-playing ten-fulls as you did that one, your friends will probably have everything but your shoes before you get home."

Billy gaped.

"You'll need your shoes to keep your feet warm," added the efficiency man. "Mr. Brooke, you pain me. You had a ten-full all the way and you only stood one raise before the draw. And then you only stood two raises afterward—and *you* called! With a ten-full!"

"There was another pat hand out," grumbled Billy, flushing.

"Piffle. How many pat fulls are dealt in an evening! As I said, I am opposed to poker. But what makes me particularly sick is to see a young man of your evident fondness for the pastime take in about

four dollars, when he is entitled to watches, jewelry, overcoats and other articles of barter and trade. Run along with your friends now, and bet yourself to death on a pair of deuces. It's the logical sequence."

Billy left the room in a daze. The efficiency man stepped over to the table, picked up the cards, shuffled them deftly, sighed, shook his head and tossed them away.

As Billy passed Constance's room she called him in.

"I didn't tell, Billy," she said. "He knew it."

"Oh, I suppose so," he mumbled. "But here he is, throwing my friends out of the house. How long is this sort of business going to last, I'd like to know?"

"Well, he threw mine out," said Constance.

"How? When?"

"To-night. He ordered Wally Van Nest out of the house and told him not to come back any more."

"What for?"

"He—he said he was futile—a waste of time."

"Well," observed Billy judicially, "you know there might be something in that, Connie."

"But I won't be insulted so!"

"That's right, too."

"And he sent a postal card to Mr. Witherbee, telling *him* not to come any more. A postal card!"

"Who? To Sherry Witherbee?"

"Sherry? Albert, you mean, don't you? His name's Albert."

"Everybody calls him Sherry."

Constance was puzzled.

"I never heard it before," she said. "Why do they call him Sherry?"

Billy laughed as he started downstairs.

"Look in the sideboard," he counseled.

Constance pondered so much over Billy's counsel that she forgot her troubles for the moment. "Sherry" Witherbee. She did not understand at all. His name was Albert Huntington Witherbee, and the only part of his first name that he used was the A. Look in the sideboard? Her curiosity became so keen that she decided to do so.

She went downstairs softly and made her way to the dining-room, where she snapped on the lights. The sideboard was a huge mahogany affair, heavy and substantial. What in the world did it have to do with Mr. Witherbee, who did not resemble it in the least? Look in it, Billy said.

She did. The lower compartments were filled with bottles of all sorts and shapes and she surveyed them idly, not having the least idea what she was looking for. There were cordials of every kind, but none of them suggested an answer to the riddle.

Constance searched further. The whiskies did not supply an explanation, either. Nor the brandies. Mr. Witherbee never used such things.

A bottle in a corner arrested her glance. "Sherry," it said on the label. Constance looked closer. Yes; there was more printing. This:

PALE, SOFT, AND NUTTY.

She curled up on the floor, rolled over and laughed until the tears streamed down.

CHAPTER XII

THE DECLARATION

THE notable documentary feature of the American Revolution was the Declaration of Independence. In this respect, the American Revolution was not a single step in advance of the Brooke Revolution. The latter was as inevitable as the former.

It was declared at breakfast, while the efficiency man happened to be looking across the table at Constance.

He could not be blamed for looking. She wore something that was blue, and the morning sunlight helped her to resemble the freshness of an old-fashioned garden at dawn—save that she was not old-fashioned. Instead, she was fetching—a poor term, yet one that will serve in these days. As for H. Hedge, he was in evident form and splendidly efficient. He was ready to make the day's work eat out of his palm.

Alice, as she took her seat, laid a tightly rolled paper at his place. It was tied with a red, white and blue ribbon. The efficiency man picked it up and examined it in a cursory fashion.

"Something for me to read?" he asked.

Alice nodded.

He slipped off the ribbon and began the laborious task of trying to make three curly sheets of foolscap lie flat.

"Never roll, always fold," he murmured.

Alice, who was watching him with bright eyes, frowned slightly, but made no comment. Constance and Billy were watching the performance with furtive glances.

The writing on the first sheet began about three inches from the top, immediately under a single line that read:

To H. Hedg, E. E.:

The efficiency man unconsciously nodded his approval of economic spelling, as applied to his own name. He read aloud:

"When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for William Walton, Constance Thatcher, and Alice Brooke to serve notice upon H. Hedge that they will not stand for all the rules and regulations he has been making, a decent respect for the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to speak as above."

"Your orange-juice, sir," interrupted the deferential voice of Horace.

"Put it down," said Hedge. "I'm busy."

He read on:

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, as follows:

"He has refused to give us our regular allowances, having cut same in half.

"He has refused to give us credit at stores, so that we cannot buy the kind of clothes and other things we need.

"He has bossed us around, when he has no right to do so, just as if he had as much to say about it as our father—which he hasn't!"

H. Hedge glanced up from his reading and detected Constance in the act of bestowing an extraordinary glance upon Alice. He continued:

"He has made a lot of rules about hours that make us feel as if we were orphan-asylum children.

"He has put a time-clock on the servants, and has got everybody filling out reports every day until we are nearly all crazy."

Billy Brooke coughed loudly and became busy with his orange. The efficiency man went on relentlessly:

"He has combined with others to subject us to a jurisdiction foreign to our Constitution and unacknowledged by our laws."

H. Hedge looked up at the paneled ceiling and racked his memory. The document bewildered him. The model was sublime, but it was difficult to tell where the model left off and Alice's document began.

Constance flushed hotly.

"Alice!" she whispered, "is *that* what you made me sign?"

Alice nodded.

"It's—it's—"

"Well, you signed," said Alice bluntly. "I asked you to read it and you wouldn't."

"But I never thought—"

The efficiency man was reading again:

"He has interfered with some of our friends coming to the

house, with circumstances of cruelty and perfidy scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous ages.

"He has excited domestic insurrections against us.

"He has made us all miserable and unhappy and ashamed to look our friends in the face, and our repeated petitions have been answered only by repeated injury."

The efficiency man seemed to be suffering from a choking spell. He was wondering how George III. felt when the Declaration of 1776 was laid at his breakfast plate.

Constance and Billy were shooting angry glances at their sister.

"Say, kid," whispered Billy, "why didn't you read it to me first?"

"Huh!" exclaimed Alice. "You signed when you heard Connie had."

"I know—but I thought she'd read it."

"She was too sleepy," said Alice. "She wouldn't. What's the matter with it, anyhow?"

Billy dug viciously into his orange and turned purple.

H. Hedge was reading again:

"A person whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of John W. Brooke's children."

He paused and studied the ceiling again. If he was busy chewing his under lip, Constance and Billy failed to notice it. They were trying to wither Alice with incendiary glances.

"We, therefore—"

H. Hedge lingered over the "therefore." He ventured an inspection of the three Brookes, but only Alice met his eye. She was defiant.

"We, therefore, William Walton Brooke, Constance Thatcher Brooke, and Alice Brooke, solemnly publish and declare that we are, and of right ought to be, free and independent children."

The efficiency man paused and read it over again, impressively. Alice sat straight in her chair; Billy and Constance bent over their plates.

"And we hereby call upon H. Hedge to abolish above said rules and give us back our full allowances. And we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor—"

Once more the reader halted and surveyed his three charges. Even Alice was pretending to be busy, now.

"—and declare that until he does the same, as aforesaid,
"WE WILL NOT EAT!

"(Signed)
"CONSTANCE BROOKE.
"W. W. BROOKE.
"ALICE BROOKE."

H. Hedge furtively wiped his eyes on his napkin.

"Just a moment," he said quietly.

The three Brookes looked up from their oranges.

"It says here," he said, pointing to the declaration, "that you will not eat."

Alice pushed her orange away and leaned back in her chair with the resolution of a martyr. Billy and Constance stared at her truculently.

"I suppose these signatures are authentic," mused the efficiency man.

It was Alice's turn to stare. She dared them with her eyes.

"Mine is," said Constance faintly.

H. Hedge looked at Billy.

"Oh, I signed," growled the latter. "Anything wrong?"

"Not at all," remarked the efficiency man with a smile. "It is a most admirable document. Only—having signed it—I was wondering why you found interest in your oranges."

Constance, who was hungry, cast a look of bitter reproach at her sister. She put down her spoon, however.

"I suppose this is in effect immediately," observed H. Hedge.

"Immediately!" declared Alice.

The efficiency man looked at the other two members of the family. It was a challenge that could not be ignored.

"Right away," said Billy.

Constance nodded.

Therefore, the thing was done. The three Brookes would not eat until H. Hedge "did the same," which was to rescind the rules and regulations that marked the installation of household efficiency.

"I observe that there are only three signers," said H. Hedge, reinspecting the declaration. "Does it extend to the entire household?"

Alice made a signal to Horace, who drew a deep

breath and walked quickly to the doorway that led into the pantry. He returned at the head of the procession. Directly behind him was Mary.

"Where is it?" she asked in a tone of dreadful calm.

"You mean this?" asked the efficiency man, handing her the declaration.

Mary glanced at Alice, and Alice nodded.

"Has anybody a pen an' ink?" asked Mary.

H. Hedge produced a fountain-pen, shook it, and proffered it to the household cook.

Mary wrote laboriously, twice stopping to shake the pen again and spattering black drops on the tablecloth.

"There! 'Tis done," she said at length. "An' now, Elvira, do ye sign."

Elvira took the pen with a timid hand.

"I—I don't know what it is," she faltered.

Mary regarded her with a look of contempt.

"Sign!" she commanded roughly. "For why should ye wait after I signed?"

"But—"

"Sign it, ye fool!"

Elvira signed.

Minnie and Ruth, the housemaids, signed with trembling fingers. So did Fanny, the laundress.

Giovanni eyed the document with distrust.

"What for?" he asked, scratching his head.

"For independence," declared Alice promptly.

"For Garibaldi!" cried Giovanni with a gesture. "Gimme da pen. I sign."

Mary Monahan looked at him sourly.

"'Tis the likes of him settin' store by Garibaldi," she muttered. "An' me signin' the same for St. Pathrick an' Robert Emmet. An' Elvira for God knows who, excipt me. An' the dear child Alice for 'indepindince.' 'Tis like we're all crazy. A-ah! An' there goes Frank. Sign, Frank, for the love av Saint Michael!"

Whereupon Frank signed, and George, and then Matilda Araminta Jones. Matilda signed her name with a flourish at the end. She looked only to make sure that the signature of Constance Brooke was above.

Horace hesitated. He had heard the reading of the document and he was troubled. Mary studied him with a hostile eye.

"Are ye afeard?" she asked contemptuously.

Horace favored her with a baleful glance, which she met unflinchingly.

"I'm thinkin' ye are," she added, curling her lip.

Horace signed, but he did it with a sinking heart. He only had heard the declaration read.

"I suppose," remarked H. Hedge, as he inspected the signature, "that you are all aware of the contents of this document?"

The servants shook their heads.

"It is a Declaration of Independence," he informed them.

"Praise the saints!" affirmed Mary fervently.

"It calls upon me to abolish the time-clock and all rules."

"Laye me sign it agin, Misther Hedge! 'Tis twice, ay, three times, I'll put me name to it."

"And," said the efficiency man impressively, "you have all pledged yourselves not to eat until I have abolished the rules."

Mary fell back a step and her glance unconsciously turned to meet the eyes of the author of the declaration. Alice winced inadvertently.

"Does it say thot?" inquired Mary in a hollow voice.

Hedge showed her the pledge.

"'Tis starvation at last," exclaimed Mary, as she read the awful words. "But don't ye care, Miss Alice, deary. I've signed, an' I'll stay signed. An' ye, too, Elvira. Not a cracker, do ye mind, now! An' no cookin'! An' look ye, Giovanni, thot ye kape the word. 'Tis for Garibaldi, mind ye—the far down! An' ye, George—"

Mary transfixed the footman with a stony glare.

"Let yez not be hanging around Elvira, to see will she cut yez a slice av ham between meals. Ay, I know the ways av ye. Don't ye be listenin' to him, Elvira. 'Tis the ham, not yez. Thrust a man for thot!"

As the servants filed from the dining-room the three Brookes arose from the table and imitated their example. H. Hedge alone remained in his place. He folded the declaration and placed it in his pocket.

"Horace," he said, "inasmuch as I am not a signer, you may continue to serve breakfast."

He ate in solitude, yet with obvious relish. It was

not until the end of the meal that he bethought himself of something. Then he tore a sheet of paper from his loose-leaf notebook and wrote:

NOTICE.

Particular care will be taken to observe House Rule No. 24, and to report any infractions or attempted infractions thereof.

H. HEDGE.

"Post this in the servants' hall, Horace," he said, as he left the dining-room.

CHAPTER XIII

AND ITS RESULTS

WHILE a board of strategy convened in Constance's sitting-room, the efficiency man was down-stairs in the library, placing in the safe the Declaration of Independence. It was too precious for the filing-cases.

"Ingenious child, Alice," he murmured. "She has the spirit of 1776 and the resourcefulness of to-day. But—"

He paused to grin.

"—it seems to me that Alice has been putting something over on the rest of the bunch."

The board of strategy, or at least a majority of it, were clearly of the same opinion. Constance and Billy glared at Alice as though quite resolved to cast her out from the family circle.

"Well, you've done it now," snapped Billy.

"Done what?"

"Done us."

"How?"

"What the blazes did you put that 'no eats' stuff in it for?" he demanded. "I'm hungry."

"But you signed it," retorted Alice. "You don't dare deny that. You didn't deny it at the table."

"But, hang it all, I didn't read it!"

"That's your fault; I asked you to read it and you wouldn't."

"Well, you told me Connie said it was all right, so I thought it was. Now I'm in fine!"

"We're all fixed the same," remarked Alice. "A big, strong man like you ought to be able to stand it as well as we can."

"What do you think I am? A suffragette? I'm no hunger striker."

"Well, anyway you signed, and you've got to stick," declared Alice. "I think's it's a great idea and I bet it'll win."

"Connie, I'm surprised that you stood for this fool thing," growled her brother.

Constance looked uncomfortable. She was hungry, too.

"I—I was sort of sleepy," she said defensibly. "Maybe I skipped some of it when I read it."

Alice glared at her sister.

"You were enough awake to throw pillows," she declared warmly. "I think you're mean not to back me up. But I don't care—you signed, and I dare you to quit!"

"How long did it say we quit eating for?" inquired Billy anxiously.

"Until he abolishes all the rules and we get all our money."

Billy groaned.

"Well, the pair of you have assassinated me and committed suicide; that's all I've got to say about it."

"All right; but that's not the point just now," remarked Constance. "The point is, what are we going to do next?"

Alice looked at her sister in astonishment.

"Why, there's no next thing to do, Connie. This is a hunger strike. You only do one thing and that is, don't eat. And you keep on doing that until—until—Why, it's easy."

"Easy! Do you call it easy to starve?"

"But we won't. We'll win! Just you see."

"When?"

"Oh, I don't know. Perhaps a week."

"A week? A *week?*"

Constance's voice rose almost to a shriek.

"Maybe only two or three days," consoled Alice. "We're not quitters, are we?"

"We may not be quitters," said Billy; "but we're not living in Holloway Jail, either."

"No—worse," declared Constance. "Are we allowed to go around the house?"

"Of course," answered Alice. "This has only to do with eating. We can go around and let him see how we are suffering. That will help."

Billy consulted the mirror.

"We're not hollow-cheeked enough for that yet," he observed gloomily. "I suppose we're allowed to go out and take appetizing walks and look into grocery-windows, aren't we?"

"Certainly, if you want. All you have to do is to keep the pledge."

"Then what were you doing with those apples before breakfast?" demanded Constance.

Alice blushed.

"Why, I—I—"

"I'll bet you ate one down-stairs," exclaimed her sister savagely.

"I did not! Honest, I didn't. I only ate two crackers."

Constance seized her younger sister by the shoulders.

"So you ate two crackers, did you? After you had signed us all up to starvation. Do you call that keeping the pledge? And you invented it!"

"But you see— Stop pinching me, Connie! You see, it wasn't really in effect until he read it."

"Coward!" said Constance.

"Traitor, I say," from Billy.

"I think you're both simply horrible," stormed Alice wrathfully, as she squirmed from her sister's grasp. "I tell you, it didn't go into effect until he sat down to breakfast. It was perfectly fair to eat two crackers."

"Yes—and let us go on starving. I suppose you hid the apples in your room."

"I was going to divide them," declared Alice. "There'd have been four for each."

"And make perjurers out of all of us," observed Billy scornfully. "Anyhow, I consider myself absolved from the whole business, because I didn't know what I was signing."

Constance shook her head. She was no more an

enthusiast over the hunger strike than her brother, but she was resolved that unless all could eat, nobody should.

"No, you're not absolved," she said judicially. "No matter what Alice does, we are still bound. And if you signed without reading, it's your own fault."

"But how are we ever going to eat again?" demanded Billy. "You don't expect he'll ever give in?"

"No-o; I'm afraid not. But there must be some way. Let's all think."

Billy, in whom hunger was rapidly developing an ostentatious grouch, elected to do his thinking in the billiard-room, where he proceeded to knock the balls around and practise impossible trick-shots, the failure of which did not improve his disposition. Alice started for the gymnasium, but remembered that exercise developed appetite, whereat she went to her room and sulked over the failure of Constance and Billy to hail her strike with acclaim.

Constance remained in her own apartment, where she tried to think, and finally dozed off on the couch.

It was long past noon when there was a commotion in the second-floor hall. Constance was the cause of it, running at top speed in the direction of her sister's room.

"I've got it!" she cried, bursting in upon Alice, who was sitting glumly at the window, staring out.

"What have you got?"

"Where's Billy? Wait till we all get together."

"He's in the billiard-room, I think."

"Come on!"

Constance seized her sister and dragged her along.

Billy had the balls lined up for a particularly difficult shot, when Constance swept them aside, and swung herself up on the table, where she sat with her feet swinging.

"I've found a way to eat!" she exclaimed.

"No!"

"To eat and *not* break our word!"

Billy flung his cue in a corner and assumed the expression of a hungry lion.

"Say it quick!" he commanded. "I'm dying on my feet."

"Forcible feeding!" cried Constance triumphantly.

Her brother looked at her in disgust and pity.

"You don't suppose that guy down-stairs is going to feed us by force, do you?" he growled. "No such luck! He don't care if we never eat again."

It was Constance's turn to express derision in her eyes.

"Of course, he won't," she said. "I didn't say he would. I'm not so foolish as to think so. But somebody else will!"

"Who?"

"Horace!"

Billy and Alice stared at their sister, registering profound perplexity.

"Listen now," commanded Constance. "What did they do with the suffragettes who went on hunger strike? They fed them by force. The suffragettes couldn't help themselves. They had to eat. But even after they had been fed they had not broken their

word. They had been overpowered and they were not responsible. Now, we are just like the suffragettes.. We cannot break our word, but if somebody comes along and just makes us eat, we can't help it. Can we?"

"No!" cried Alice and Billy.

"We are still on hunger strike, aren't we?"

"Yes!"

"And we are doing our best to live up to our word, but somebody else won't let us."

"You bet we are!"

Constance viewed the other Brookes with a superior air.

"Am I a good thinker?" she demanded.

"Great!"

"All right. Send for Horace."

The butler came up-stairs, a troubled look on his face. Something had happened in the Brooke household that he did not understand.

"Horace," said Constance, "get a large tray, fill it completely with food, and bring it here inside five minutes."

Horace hesitated, swallowed hard, and then shook his head slowly and timidly.

"I—I can't, Miss Brooke."

"Can't! What do you mean?"

"It's against positive orders."

"Whose?"

"Mr. Hedge's, miss. He sent out word for us all to be particular about Rule 24."

"What's that?"

"It says that no meals are to be served outside the dining-room, except with his orders."

Billy and Alice groaned, but Constance remained undismayed.

"I care nothing for Mr. Hedge's rules," she said coldly. "I order you to do as I say."

"I'll—I'll be discharged, Miss Brooke."

"You may not be caught."

"It's a big risk, miss."

Constance fixed a stony glance upon the butler.

"Horace," she said, "perhaps you will be discharged, if Mr. Hedge finds it out; but you will be hired back again when my father returns. But if you do not do as I say, while Mr. Hedge will probably keep you in his employ, you will most certainly be fired when my father returns—and you will be fired for good. Can you understand that, Horace?"

"Yes, Miss Brooke."

"Do as I say, then."

Horace turned and started upon the execution of his perilous errand.

"Use the rear stairs," cautioned Constance, "and bring a clothes-line with you as well as the food."

"A clothes-line, miss?"

"Yes. Hurry now. I'll explain the rest when you come back."

She turned to Billy and demanded some pennies. When he had produced these, Constance distributed them among the three.

"We match to see who's fed first," she explained. "Odd man wins."

The choice fell to Billy, who whooped his joy until Alice scowled at him.

"But what's the clothes-line idea?" he asked.

"Horace has to overpower you and tie you in a chair before you can be fed. Don't you understand? You succumb to force."

"Say—if I'm going to be fed, I can be tied up with a raveling thread. Oh, you grub!"

The tray that Horace brought into the billiard-room was the fairest sight the three Brookes had ever seen. It was piled high with heaps of bread and butter, cold chicken, cold tongue, jams, jellies, cakes, sandwiches, fruits, and a large pot of steaming coffee.

"I don't think I was seen," whispered Horace, as he set the tray on the billiard-table. "And here's the clothes-line, miss. I'll get back down-stairs now before he misses me."

"Oh, no, you won't," said Constance. "We are not through with you, Horace. You have to stay here and feed us."

The butler looked blank.

"Now, we haven't time to explain all the reasons for this," she continued hurriedly. "We're too hungry. You simply do as I say and as quickly as you can. To begin with, you grab hold of Billy, overpower him, and put him in that chair."

Horace shrank back, terrified and shocked.

"Why, Miss Brooke—"

"Hurry! He won't hurt you. Why, he'll only be a child in your hands. Won't you, Billy?"

"Sure," said Billy with a grin. He was nearly a foot taller than the butler.

"Grab him, Horace!"

Horace advanced gingerly and placed a gentle hand on Billy's arm.

"Resist, Billy!" commanded Constance.

Billy made a feeble motion with his little finger and sighed.

"Push him into the chair!" Constance was giving her orders like a general.

Billy backed toward the chair so rapidly that Horace could hardly keep pace with him.

"Now, Billy, protest!"

"I protest!" whispered Billy.

"Now you and I protest, Alice. Ready?"

"Aw, hurry up," complained Billy. "I'm dead!"

"We must observe certain rules," said Constance firmly. "Now, Alice!"

The two Brooke girls raised their hands dramatically and chorused:

"We protest!"

Horace scratched his head and regarded them uncertainly. He feared that absence of a breakfast had sapped their reason.

"Now, Horace, you say to us: 'Stand back! I am an officer of the law.'"

Horace coughed and stammered.

"Say it!"

"Stand back. I am an officer of the law," he mumbled in a flat voice.

"Good. Now we stand back. We are afraid of

you and dare not interfere. Now, you tie Billy in the chair with the clothes-line. Be sure to tie it around his arms."

As though he were committing a sacrilege, Horace picked up the clothes-line and passed it once around Billy's body. He was preparing to make further loops about his victim when Billy interrupted him.

"Hey! That'll do. I'm tied hard and fast. Can't move a muscle."

The butler stepped back and viewed his ruthless work.

"Now feed him!" commanded Constance.

"Yes, feed me!" echoed Billy. "Push a chicken sandwich into my mouth, if you dare—you coward!"

Horace was a good servant. He understood not in the least the meaning of it all, but he recognized an order when he heard one. From the glorious trayful he selected one of Mary's sandwich masterpieces and advanced upon the helpless prisoner, napkin in hand. Billy opened his mouth wide. One eye winked triumphantly at his sisters, who stood mute and envious, awaiting their hour of torture. The sandwich was not six inches from Billy's lips, when—

"All very interesting," said a cool voice from the doorway, "but completely against the rules."

The sandwich fell from Horace's trembling hand and was wrecked upon the floor.

"Horace," said the efficiency man, "you will immediately take that tray of food down-stairs. You deserve discharge for this violation of orders, but because of your long service in the family I will over-

look this one instance. It will, however, be noted upon your record, counting as twenty demerits."

The three Brookes were speechless, as Horace picked up the tray and went hurriedly from the room. They stared at the food as long as it was in sight, and after that at H. Hedge.

"If any of you are ill," he said, "I shall send for a physician. If he decides that it is necessary for you to go to bed, you will go to bed. If he prescribes food for you under those conditions, you may have it and eat it, if you wish. But under no other circumstances will food be served, except in the dining-room, and then only at regular meal hours. It is now two-thirty o'clock and lunch has been over for an hour. The next meal is at seven o'clock. Thank you for your attention."

The efficiency man was gone as silently as he came.

For a short minute nobody spoke. Then it was Billy who, after tossing aside his bonds, stood up and declared:

"For once in my life I'm fit to commit murder. Confound it all, I could eat Hedge! Why did you go through all that rigmarole, Connie? I'd have had one sandwich, anyhow, if you hadn't been so particular."

"I was trying to save the family honor," she said miserably. "Oh, dear!"

Alice was almost on the verge of tears.

"I—I wish I'd never thought of the hunger strike!" she stormed. "Did—did you ever see such beautiful food in your life?"

Billy stalked from the room and disappeared in the direction of his own quarters. The two girls heard his door slam viciously.

"So long as it had to happen, I'm glad it came when it did," observed Constance. "If Billy had been fed, and we hadn't, I'd have never forgiven myself."

"Never mind, Connie. It was a beautiful scheme. But what are we going to do next?"

"I think I have an idea for that, too. I'll tell you later."

At seven o'clock in the evening four persons sat at the table in the dining-room. Three of them were hungry-eyed Brookes.

"We have decided," said Constance icily, "to withdraw our demands for the present. A strike does not seem to be practical."

The efficiency man bowed politely. He did not betray the slightest evidence of exultation. He merely replied:

"You are wrong about a strike not being practical. This one was—eminently so. It resulted in the saving of three dollars eighty-seven cents' worth of food, which, added to other economies, makes this a red-letter day in the household.

"Oh, and by the way," added Hedge as an afterthought, "since you and your brother have refused to work, your allowances are suspended until further notice. Alice's will continue, since she goes to school."

The two older Brookes were too nearly famished to do more than groan.

CHAPTER XIV

COMPLIMENTS OF THE SEASON

AND Christmas came with such silent and swift approach that the three Brookes were not aware until it was fairly upon them. Then they gasped at their own unpreparedness. Christmas was always a ceremony in the Brookes mansion, albeit an expensive one. But the Brookes were in poverty, even though they were admirably filled with the spirit.

"Well, what are we going to give each other?" demanded Alice, whose mind was normally of practical purpose.

"Greetings," said Billy, turning his pockets inside out.

Constance frowned. "At least we will have the usual tree," she remarked with finality. "We have a few traditions left."

"Yes. We are strong on tradition," affirmed Billy. "But we are awfully weak on the other stuff. You can't buy anything with a tradition."

"Except happiness."

"You can't buy ten cents' worth of that," from Alice. "We can't even buy a tree."

"E. E. can," said Constance. "He can buy anything—but he won't."

"Except a hat," Billy observed savagely.

Constance smiled reminiscently. She could not deny that the hat had been an achievement.

"Tut," she counseled. "Let's keep in the spirit, anyhow."

So, always in the spirit, they approached H. Hedge on the subject of Christmas.

"I do not approve of Christmas gifts," announced the efficiency man.

"There won't be many gifts," said Constance sadly. "But there is always the Christmas spirit."

"Yes? What is the Christmas spirit, Miss Brooke?"

Constance stared.

"What is it? Why—"

The efficiency man waited patiently for the remainder of the answer, but Constance had lost her voice in wonderment at the question. Alice answered.

"A tree," she said.

"So you regard a tree as the Christmas spirit?"

"Symbolical," remarked Billy offhandedly, who was so pleased with the way the word rolled out that he said it again. "Symbolical."

Alice nodded.

"It may symbolize something," admitted Hedge, "but I do not approve of a tree."

The Brookes drew slightly away from him.

"We always have a tree," said Constance.

"And it is always decorated with candles and we always hang up our stockings," supplemented Alice.

"I have no objection to your hanging up your stockings," observed the efficiency man judicially. "I can-

not see that it does any harm, except to lend encouragement to a foolish myth and possibly to breathe the fallacy of expecting something for nothing. But as to a tree and candles—no."

"What's the reason we can't have a tree?" demanded Billy.

"They're unsafe, for one thing. There is a liability to fire."

"We use electric candles."

"A waste of current. A tree also entails an unnecessary amount of cleaning in the house. Furthermore, it is wicked, because it represents an attack upon the natural resources of the country. The decorations that are placed on it are tawdry and without artistic merit. Such gifts as are hung upon it or placed under it are almost invariably foolish and unnecessary. The entire custom and practice relating to Christmas trees is wasteful and extravagant and serves no useful purpose. No tree."

The Brooke children studied the creature who had thus developed a newly horrid aspect. Alice, still secure in her daily pittance, rallied.

"Very well," she said haughtily. "If you will not get us a tree, I will buy one."

"You may buy it," H. Hedge informed her, "but it will not enter the house."

"I cannot bring my own tree into the house?"

"No."

"Why, we have *always* had a tree—right in this very room! You can't have Christmas without one."

"You can have the 25th of December without it,

at any rate," answered the efficiency man. "That is what we will have—the 25th of December."

"Why—even the poor have trees!"

"Sure; *we're* entitled to one," added Billy with fine irony.

"No tree."

"Just a little one!" pleaded Alice.

"No."

"Why, even the servants have a tree!"

"Do they? I'm glad you mentioned it," said Hedge, making a memorandum, the sinister character of which the Brookes understood.

"This is the very last straw!" cried Constance.

"Well, it shows which way the wind blows," returned the efficiency man brutally.

He wanted to end the argument, and he succeeded. The three Brookes, as had become their habit under such circumstances, retired for conference. As an interchange of counsel and advice it did not amount to much; but as an indignation meeting it was a superb success. Everybody made a speech and some of them were delivered in unison.

"Well, anyhow, we can ask somebody else to invite us around to their party," said Billy.

The tree was such an established tradition in the Brookes household that it was impossible to contemplate Christmas without one. But Constance, always unconsciously assuming command, shook her head.

"No family has a right to invade some other family's Christmas," she said. "I wouldn't dream of such

a thing. It would be like begging for presents, too; and we haven't quite reached that."

"Pretty nearly," remarked Alice dolefully. "I'll cry my head off if I don't see a tree on Christmas."

"None of us will be exactly cheerful," her sister said. "None of us but— And I suppose he will rub his hands and congratulate himself."

So came Christmas Eve to the three paupers of the big Fifth Avenue mansion. Dinner was eaten in almost complete silence. Only H. Hedge attempted to talk, and he abandoned the effort after a brief trial. There was nobody to talk with; the Brookes were at table, but they would not answer him.

It was past nine o'clock when a solemn procession of three, headed by Billy, walked out into the night. The efficiency man, who, as usual, was working, did not become aware of the exodus until the big front door closed. For an instant he contemplated pursuit; then abandoned the idea and turned again to his examination of the day's accounts.

The three Brookes walked for several hours and several miles. There was nothing else to do. Billy strode along in the center, a sister clinging to either arm. They saw shops and shoppers, bundles, delivery wagons, wreaths—everything that concerned a Christmas of which they were not a part.

It was not a pleasant night to walk, unless you had your pockets filled with money. There was a raw wind and a leaden sky. It was no night whatever for an indefinite goal.

At that, however, it was better than a great house

on Fifth Avenue—with no Christmas. The Brookes children were unanimous on that point, even though they were not enamored of the alternative.

It was Alice who made the big discovery—a tree!

Flaunting its colored lights against the black sky, it sprang into vision as the wanderers rounded a wind-swept corner and paused momentarily for breath. It was a very large Christmas tree; the largest Alice had ever seen. Almost it seemed to reach into the scudding clouds. But for all its size, it was truly a Christmas tree. The tinsel was there, and the garish ornaments, while the electric candles appeared to be numbered by the thousand.

Alice uttered an exclamation and pointed. For a full minute the Brooke children stood and stared at the apparition. The waving branches beckoned to them.

"The charity tree!" whispered Constance.

Then, without a further word, the trio drove forward against the wind, crossed the street, and entered Madison Square.

A winding walk among the benches carried them to the outer rim of a crowd that stood oblivious to the night, conscious only of the big tree that shed a prismatic radiance in the center of the little park. It was not a crowd in furs; much of it was not even a crowd in overcoats. But for all that, it was a Christmas crowd, and because of this the Brookes again felt themselves strangely aloof from it.

Only with the tree itself did they seem to be on terms of intimacy and understanding. The tree was

friendly; it belonged as much to the three Brookes as to any of the hundreds who gazed up at its lights. So they stood and stared, unmindful of numbed feet and tingling ears. And while they stood the snow came; intermittent flurries at first—the outriders of the storm. And then, in steadily increasing numbers, the soft flakes, flying lightly in the gusts, swept down from the dark sky and began their patient work of covering the earth.

There was an uncertain stir in the crowd. Little groups began to detach themselves and wander off into the night. A man standing close to Constance turned up a flimsy coat collar, blew upon his fingers, and hurried away. Two women with baskets sighed, took their last look at the bravely blazing tree, and joined the scattering retreat. But still the Brooke children lingered.

A deep-voiced bell from somewhere beyond the square struck a heavy note—then another—and another. Billy looked up at the great clock in the Metropolitan Tower. Midnight! Christmas Eve was over.

"Merry Christmas, Connie," he said, slipping his arm around her shoulders.

She reached up and kissed him.

"Merry Christmas, Billy."

He turned to Alice, drew her close, and kissed a face that was wet with melted snowflakes.

"Merry Christmas, Alice!"

"Merry Christmas!"

And then the sisters stood for a minute, their arms

about each other, their cheeks touching, their lips whispering "Merry Christmas!"

Why not? It was their tree, as much as anybody's. And they would have kissed each other at Christmas, no matter where fortune might have found them.

Constance felt a light hand on her arm, and, turning, looked down into the big eyes of a child. The girl was not more than twelve, yet her face seemed strangely old for her small body. It was framed in a shawl, and it smiled up at Constance in a spirit of comradeship.

"I—I came out to see the tree," ventured the child.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?"

"Yes, ma'am. And I—I—"

"Yes?"

"I was just watchin' you, ma'am, an' the gentleman, an' the other lady."

The child paused and smiled again, this time in manifest confusion.

"And why did you watch us?" asked Constance gently.

"I was watchin' you say 'Merry Chris'mus.' "

"Oh!"

"An' I was wonderin' if—"

Once more the voice faltered, but the smile persisted.

Constance stooped down, took the small face between her hands, and kissed it.

"Did I guess right?" she whispered.

"Yes, ma'am. That was it. Merry Chris'mus:

Now I'm goin' home, ma'am. We—we ain't got a tree."

"And we haven't any, either, dear," said Constance gently.

The child stared in unbelief, then turned and started to hurry away.

"Wait, please!" called Alice.

She was fumbling with chilled fingers in a small purse.

"Merry Christmas!" she said, thrusting something into the child's hand.

The little girl stared down into her palm and hesitated.

"I didn't mean that," she said.

"But you will—just to please me," said Alice in a voice that was not very steady.

"Why—yes, ma'am. An'—Merry Chris'mus!"

The little girl with the shawl ran off into the night.

The three Brookes watched the small figure until the darkness blotted it out, then looked at each other, and then for a last time at the tree.

"Let's go," said Billy, linking arms again.

They crossed the square into Broadway, walking in silence until, after several blocks had been covered in the flying snow, Billy began to whistle an inconsequential little tune.

"Let's eat," he said presently, bringing his sisters to an abrupt stop in front of a window, where a man with a white cap was busy turning pancakes.

"Can we?" asked Constance eagerly.

"Sure," he answered grandly.

So they ate pancakes and drank steaming coffee, and discovered that paper napkins are a rather clever invention. And then out again into a white Christmas.

"Anybody got any money?" asked Billy, as they paused on the sidewalk. "Mine's gone."

"I gave mine to the little girl," said Alice.

"And I didn't have any," confessed Constance.

The Brooke children looked at each other and laughed.

"Then it's us for a walk," announced Billy.

"Of course," chorused Constance and Alice contentedly.

So they walked up Broadway, clinging tightly to each other's arms.

In the library of the Brooke mansion the efficiency man was pacing the floor. He was nervous, and, therefore, it was for him an extraordinary occasion. Frequently he glanced at the slowly ticking clock, comparing it with his watch, as though to make quite sure it were long past midnight.

He wished he had obeyed his impulse of hours ago, to go in pursuit of his three charges. A heavy sense of responsibility sat upon him; he was becoming worried. Now and then he stepped to a window and pushed aside the curtains, staring out at the storm. The whirling snow did not give him any comfort.

He rang a bell and, to his surprise, Matilda answered instead of Horace.

"Where is Miss Brooke?" he demanded.

"I don't know," answered Matilda icily. She purposely omitted the "sir."

H. Hedge was unconscious of the fact that he had neglected to make his question inclusive. It seemed quite natural to have nobody but Constance in mind.

"Did she wear her new hat?" he asked irrelevantly.

"I don't know."

He shook his head in annoyance.

"Did she say when she would be back?"

"She didn't say anything."

"You're Miss Brooke's maid, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Then how is it you don't know anything about her?"

Matilda stiffened her angular figure and looked squarely into the eyes of the efficiency man.

"If you would treat her as she ought to be treated," said Matilda with surprising heat, "she wouldn't have to run out of the house on Christmas Eve."

H. Hedge stared in astonishment. The indictment caught him unprepared.

"There is nothing to be criticized in my treatment of Miss Brooke," he snapped. "Absolutely nothing. I treat her very well."

"Oh, do you?" sniffed Matilda. "She thinks differently."

The efficiency man fell into a brief reverie. He was really very much surprised. The mere suggestion that he did not treat Constance properly shocked him. He was conscious of an intention to treat her in the best possible manner. Why, he had even bought her a hat

—at a hundred and fifty! He wanted to do anything that Constance wanted—within reason. Why! Oh, H. Hedge had his reasons.

"I wish you would tell Miss Brooke—"

He stopped short. It was undignified to send messages by a servant. He would tell her himself, if necessary.

"Well?" demanded Matilda.

"I wish you would tell her, when she comes in, to change her shoes and stockings immediately. It is very wet outside."

It was not what he intended to say at all. Matilda snorted contemptuously.

One o'clock came. He lighted his fifth cigar and continued his walk, back and forth, the length of the library. Outside it was snowing harder than ever, and the wind had risen to half a gale. The cigar was nearly burned when a noise caught his keen ear and brought him to a sudden halt.

Somewhere a key was turning in a latch. An instant later he heard a stamping of feet, a muffled chorus of laughter, then the closing of the front door. The efficiency man's lips tightened and a stern look came into his eyes. Outside in the hall there was a mysterious whispering, lasting for nearly a minute.

Then the portières parted and the three Brookes stood on the threshold. They looked like snowmen, save for their glowing eyes and their red cheeks. They were laughing.

The efficiency man braced himself against the table and frowned.

"Where have you been?" he demanded shortly.

"That," said Constance, "we will never tell. We just stopped to wish you a Merry Christmas!"

Before the efficiency man could speak again the Brooke children vanished. He could hear them racing up the stairs, laughing as they ran.

For a while he stood leaning against the table, glowering at the rug. Then, as he walked across the room and snapped off the lights, he muttered:

"Oh, the devil!"

Alice stole into Constance's room, enveloped in a quilted kimono.

"Wasn't it fun?" she gasped.

"What?"

"To see E. E. sitting up for us."

Constance surveyed herself in the mirror and continued to comb her hair.

"Not so much," she observed.

"What?"

"I said, 'Not so much.'"

Alice looked disappointed.

"He looked rather sad, I thought," added Constance.

"Sad! Well, why shouldn't he? Don't you want him to look sad? Oughtn't he to look sad?"

Constance ran her fingers through a heavy strand of chestnut hair and studied her image critically.

"I don't know, Alice," she said in a preoccupied tone. "It's Christmas, you know, and—"

"You're getting mushy," declared Alice brutally.

Constance arose from her dresser, grasped her sister firmly by the shoulders and propelled her out of the room. Mushy, indeed! Her cheeks were flaming. Nevertheless, he *had* looked sad. She was willing to leave it to anybody. No—she wasn't, either.

CHAPTER XV

A PROPHYLACTIC PARTY

AS a Christmas morning resolution, H. Hedge decided to square himself—and when he decided anything, it was equivalent to doing it. He summoned the three Brookes from the gymnasium. Constance was flushed from a vigorous session with the punching-bag, although she was breathing easily.

"Fine condition," the efficiency man told himself as he looked upon her with frank approval. "Sound wind—and a remarkably good short-arm punch. Choppy little hook, too. If she would only extend her efficiency!"

"Well, what's the particular crime now?" demanded Billy.

"We are giving a party," said H. Hedge, coming out of his reverie.

The Brooke children flopped into chairs.

"A party December 31," added the efficiency man.

"O-oh!" exclaimed Alice. "New Year's Eve."

"I believe so—yes."

"What sort of a party?" asked Alice.

"Is there more than one kind?"

"Several," affirmed Constance, finding her voice. "There are bridge parties, dancing parties—"

"This will be a dancing party, then. Remember, December 31. Party. O. K."

He made a memorandum on a pad.

"That's all," he added. "You may go."

The Brookes arose from their chairs and the efficiency man dismissed them with a wave of his hand.

The Brooke children filed out of the library and went back to the gymnasium. Billy tapped his forehead knowingly.

"Balmy," he said.

"Perhaps," assented Constance. "But it was too good a chance to lose. We just can't live if we don't do something."

"And I'm going!" cried Alice triumphantly.

Any sort of a party was an important affair for Alice, because she had not yet been "introduced," and was still at an age that required her to mope in her room during most of the parties in the Brooke mansion. The efficiency man had not seen fit to eliminate her, and she had been careful not to raise the point.

"You don't imagine he's getting human?" asked Billy, still dazed by the news.

"Not permanently," said Constance. "That's too much to expect. But it sounds as if he was going to take a night off."

The three Brookes waited for H. Hedge to say something more about the party, and in vain. They were afraid to bring up the matter themselves, for fear of an argument and a clash that would lead to cancellation. They simply knew that invitations had gone out, for Horace mailed them. Who had been

asked and who omitted they did not know; the efficiency man had possession of the social list and had used his own judgment.

"I hope he didn't forget to invite us," observed Alice, "so long as it's going to be in our house."

"He said it was our party," Constance observed, "although we don't seem to have anything to do with it. Still, I don't want anything to do with it, because he'll do what he pleases anyhow. This is his last chance, so far as I am concerned. He stands or falls on this party."

"He's been falling for so long that it doesn't seem to make any difference whether he hits bottom or not," complained Alice. "If he fell a million miles he'd still be here, I guess."

The Brooke children went for a long walk on the day of the party, returning only half an hour before dinner. They found the efficiency man in evening dress.

"You'd better hurry up," he said, glancing at his watch. "You'll have to dress before dinner."

"Before dinner!" echoed Billy. "Isn't there lots of time afterward?"

"Dinner at seven; party at seven-thirty. Hurry."

Constance felt that she was going down in a runaway express elevator.

"You don't mean to say you've invited people here at *seven-thirty?*" she demanded.

"Certainly!"

"Why, no party begins before nine-thirty at the very earliest!"

"This one does."

"Why, it'll take three-quarters of an hour for my hair!"

"Takes eight seconds for mine," remarked H. Hedge. "Four minutes and forty seconds to shave. Six to dress. And you don't shave. No reason why you can't be ready."

Constance fled, followed by her brother and sister.

"Shall we confer?" asked Billy grimly as they reached the second floor.

"Oh, what's the use?" cried Constance with a tragic gesture. "I'd fly out of the window, if I could! But we're in for it. We might have known something awful would happen. We ought to have been firm and refused to have a party. But what can we do? He's gone and invited a lot of our friends and we've simply got to receive them. Hustle into your clothes, Alice. Wear the pink. I'll let Matilda help you; I'll manage without her. Move now, Billy, and don't spend half an hour with your tie. Remember that we're all to be publicly executed at seven-thirty."

In spite of these admonitions the three Brookes were late at dinner, and after a hasty meal they retreated up-stairs again for further sartorial attentions. It was long past seven-thirty when Constance descended to the main floor. She was just in time to see the front door close on a couple in evening dress. They were going out!

Constance paused in the hall at the foot of the staircase. She was a radiant figure, but she did not

feel radiant. She felt that the elevator was dropping again.

A gurgling noise close beside her caused her to turn sharply, and she beheld a young man with a handkerchief to his face, shaken with a violent paroxysm of coughing. It was Tommy Treadwell.

"Hel-hello, C-Connie," he gasped. "I—I—"

He strangled again.

"Why, Tom, what in the world is the matter?" demanded Constance in genuine alarm.

"Ex—excuse me. I—"

Once more a spasm took charge of him, and Constance began to pound him energetically on the back. After a minute, Tommy Treadwell regained a measure of control and wiped his streaming eyes.

"Better now?" asked Constance anxiously.

"Yes—thanks. Sorry to be such a nuisance, but—"

"You shouldn't have thought of coming out with such a cold," she chided.

"Cold? I haven't got a cold."

"Then whatever is the matter?"

Tommy pointed toward the library and whispered hoarsely:

"Been sprayed!"

"Sprayed!"

"Uh-huh. Nose, throat, tonsils—the whole works."

Constance stared at him in unbelief.

"Had my lungs tested and my heart listened to, just like I was joining the army."

"Tom!"

"Honest. And they put down my age, and who was to be notified."

"*Who* did this thing?"

"The doctor. He's all dressed in white, and he's got a nurse with him and a whole kit full of tools."

"What doctor?"

"Search me, Connie. But he's on the job, anyhow. I got through, but he's been turning some of 'em down. Notice that couple who went out just as you came down?"

Constance nodded faintly. She was clutching the newel post for support.

"That was Florrie Richmond and her brother. Couldn't pass."

"Who—Florrie? What was the matter?"

"Oh, Florrie got by all right. It was Clarence. He had a spot on one tonsil. When they wouldn't let him stay, Florrie got mad and went away with him."

Constance moaned.

"They ruled Hildegarde Forrest off the track, too," observed Tommy with a reminiscent grin. "She was half a degree subnormal and they wouldn't let her start. Teddy Wall is out of it, too. They wanted to compress the turbinate bone in his nose, so he could breathe better, and he said he'd be— He said they couldn't do it."

Constance passed a weary hand across her eyes. She had become haggard.

"What's it all about, anyhow, Connie?" asked Tommy. "Some kind of a joke?"

"A joke!" she gasped. "A joke!"

Suddenly her limp form stiffened and she made a dash for the library.

The first figure she observed was that of a tall man in a long white robe. He was bending over somebody who sat in a chair. At his side stood a woman in the uniform of a nurse. She was holding a bottle in one hand and a ferocious nickled instrument in the other. The efficiency man was close by, armed with a pad and a fountain-pen.

As Constance paused, rigid, there was an abrupt commotion, and a young man in evening attire sprang out of the chair and pushed the man in white violently away from him.

"You let me alone!" he bawled. "I don't care if I've got hydrophobia. You'll not stick that thing down my throat."

The doctor looked at H. Hedge.

"If you won't submit to examination I cannot permit you to stay," said the efficiency man to the patient.

The patient glared for five seconds and then stalked from the room.

"Next," called the doctor.

At that point Constance intervened. She walked swiftly across the library and planted herself resolutely in front of the efficiency man.

"Explain!" she commanded.

"Certainly," he said suavely. "I am safeguarding the members of this household."

"You mean—"

"Just this, Miss Brooke. I am charged with the care of you three children. That extends to your health, among other things. Large assemblies of persons offer exceptional opportunity for the transmission of infectious and contagious diseases. I do not propose to have any of you run the risk of illness. Neither do I propose, if all reasonable care can prevent it, to have any guest in this house participate in dancing unless his or her heart and lungs are in a proper condition to endure the strain. It would be embarrassing to be compelled to call a coroner. I am, therefore, taking every precaution. Dr. Wardell will not only conduct such examinations as may be necessary, but will also remain in attendance during the evening, ready to perform professional services whenever they may be required. And may I compliment you upon your gown?"

Constance did not hear the compliment. Her ears had ceased to record any definite sounds, somewhere in the middle of the efficiency man's explanation. She was quivering with silent rage.

"If you will go across the hall into the parlor," observed H. Hedge, "you will find a number of your guests, who, I am happy to say, have passed a satisfactory examination. I suggest that you join them. They should have been dancing before this, but do not seem to have begun. I wish you would ask them to start. Unfortunately, I shall be busy here for some time."

He gave her a nod of dismissal and turned to make a note of the name, age, and address of a terrified

little blonde in blue, who was holding out a rosy tongue for inspection, and having her pulse perused at the same time.

Constance made her way mechanically in the direction of the room that H. Hedge insisted upon calling a parlor, to her daily horror. She was making a violent effort to preserve her sanity. The company of young people upon whom she gazed did not appear to be attending a party. They were making about as much noise as the figures on a movie screen. Most of them were gathered in little groups. Occasionally there was a whisper, but for the most part silence. Constance hesitated at the threshold merely for an instant. The situation was almost at the verge of fatality.

She crossed the room quickly and went into the music-room, where she found Horace, the butler, standing stiffly at attention.

"Where is the music?" she demanded, glancing about her. "Tell them to start at once."

"I am the music, Miss Brooke," said Horace in a hollow tone.

"You! What do you mean?"

"There is no music except me, miss. I am—I am—" The butler's voice faltered. "I am to play that thing."

He pointed gloomily in the direction of the phonograph, which had been moved in from the library.

"You've been playing that!"

"Twice, Miss Brooke. 'Too Much Mustard' and

'Oh, You Beautiful Doll.' Nobody danced. I am about to try 'Cupid Astray."

With a suppressed shriek of horror, Constance charged upon the music-machine, slammed the lid and locked it.

"Throw that key out of the window," she commanded, "and find my brother immediately. Bring him here!"

She flung herself at the piano and began playing wildly, conscious only of a desire to make a terrific noise.

Billy Brooke had to shout in her ear before she was aware of his presence.

"Make them dance!" she screamed. "Make them do something! I'm going crazy. I'm going to play and play and play until I die. Make them dance, run, jump—or anything. I don't care. We're all going to commit suicide when it's over, anyhow, so what difference does it make? Ha, ha!"

She laughed hysterically and beat out a two-step until her fingers throbbed. She was still playing when the efficiency man, having superintended the examination of the last guest, who was rejected for adenoids, joined his antiseptic party and gravely demonstrated the *Danse Economique.*

At ten o'clock there was a service of sandwiches in sealed and sterilized wrappers, accompanied by lemonade and ginger ale, the choice of which was optional among the guests. This took place in the dining-room, where numerous camp-chairs had been arranged in soldierly rows along the walls.

But of all this Constance was unconscious. She had escaped to a far corner of the conservatory, where she wept dismally into a tiny square of lace. It was there that Tommy Treadwell found her, and presently she was weeping against Tommy's shoulder while he tried awkwardly to soothe her.

"I can never look anybody in the face again," she wailed. "I can't stand it. I'm going to run away!"

"Honestly, will you?" he demanded eagerly.

"I'll do anything to escape this," sobbed Constance.

"Will you run away with me?"

Tommy's voice was trembling and his eyes pleading as she looked up at him.

"I've asked you to marry me three times already," he went on. "Won't you, Connie? Please!"

Connie buried her face against his coat again and tried to think. She was fond of Tommy Treadwell, and it was true that he had asked her three times. But Constance had never taken Tommy seriously, because she did not want to. She had never felt like marrying anybody. She was still living her girl days. There would be plenty of time to marry later on. As for Tommy—well, when the time came, it might be him, or it might be somebody else. She did not love Tommy, she was quite sure; but she did like him tremendously.

It was hard to think, although she wrestled with her problem heroically. A voice seemed to be crying into her ears, "Escape! Escape! It's your chance!" The idea of escape dominated her. And Tommy was offering the way to freedom.

"Please marry me, Connie," he urged softly. "I'll be awfully good to you."

She knew that. She knew Tommy Treadwell for true blue, and she knew that he would walk Broadway on his hands and knees for her, if she commanded. But she did not love him.

"Escape!" urged the little voice.

Tommy stroked her hair and talked pleadingly.

"Marry me, Connie, and I'll take you away from it all. You just see if I don't make you happy."

He talked with the fine confidence and sincerity of youth.

"Answer me, Connie, dear. Will you marry me?"

Constance did not answer. She did not have time. The voice of a third person intervened.

"Miss Brooke will not marry you," said the efficiency man calmly.

Constance sprang back with a cry, and Tommy Treadwell flushed, but stood his ground.

"What have you got to say about it?" he demanded.

"Everything. Kindly get your hat and coat from the butler and leave."

"You mean to tell me I haven't a right to ask Connie to marry me?"

"No; I did not say that. You have the right. You have exercised it. Very good. That settles it."

"But you—"

"I do the answering; you do the asking," said the efficiency man blandly. "You will go now."

"And suppose I don't take your answer?"

"Take it or leave it—it goes."

Constance's first emotion was one of utter humiliation, which was quickly succeeded by rage. She flashed a look of defiance at H. Hedge.

"I will marry whom I please!" she stormed. "I will—"

"You will go to your room, Miss Brooke," interrupted the efficiency man coldly.

"I won't. I'll—"

Tommy Treadwell, with a sense of true delicacy, put an end to the scene.

"You're all unstrung, Connie," he said gently. "Better get some rest. Good night."

She hesitated, then buried her face in her hands and walked away slowly. As she passed Tommy, he whispered swiftly:

"I'll 'phone to-morrow. Be ready."

He did not even say good night to H. Hedge, but strode from the conservatory and a minute later left the house.

As for the party, it ended, according to fixed time limit, at eleven o'clock. There were not very many left at that hour, so that no extensive hardship was done. Only the efficiency man was about down-stairs when the New Year came in with a tolling of bells.

"He looks rather sound and sensible," mused H. Hedge as he turned out the desk light. "But, as for marrying Constance—certainly not! I cannot permit it."

CHAPTER XVI

THE ELOPEMENT

CONSTANCE arose early. It was scarcely seven o'clock, but there was a strategic reason for the unusual event. Constance was going away; she was about to quit the shelter of the Brooke roof-tree for that of another, and it was essential that the efficiency man should be unaware of the fact until it had been accomplished.

Constance was going to be married. Yes, to Tommy Treadwell, of course. He was her refuge in time of tribulation and despair.

"It makes no difference," mused Constance as she dressed hastily, "that I don't love Tommy. He understands. He knows I like and admire him, and he's going to be satisfied with that. I think he's almost heroic to marry a girl that he knows doesn't love him. But I *can't* exist here. And I must—yes, *must*—find a new home for Billy and Alice. Tommy has promised to take both of them until father returns. I suppose it will get into the papers, but— Oh, anything is better than this!"

Tommy was to call early, for Constance did not propose to face H. Hedge at breakfast. She had seen the last of him, she fervently hoped. That is, she thought she hoped. Yet it was curious and discon-

certing that the image of the efficiency man kept impinging upon her mental vision.

"If he would only stop being efficient," she said aloud, viewing her dark-blue traveling-costume in the mirror. Then she found herself flushing. "Well, suppose he did stop. What then?"

She packed a grip, carefully yet swiftly; later she would send for the rest of her wardrobe. As she did so, she kept shaking her head emphatically.

"I must think of nobody but Tommy," she said. "It's not fair to think about anybody else."

The breakfast gong had not sounded when Constance made a final survey of herself, seized a big muff, picked up the grip, and moved briskly to the door of her room. At the threshold she paused long enough to look up and down the hall. She did not want to meet either Billy or Alice; she would telephone them after it was all over. The hall was empty of life, so Constance stepped out and headed for the rear staircase.

One flight she descended rapidly, which carried her as far as the main floor, and then she began to follow more cautiously the second flight, which was poorly lighted and had two sharp turns. At the first turn she paused abruptly. She heard footsteps in the semi-gloom below. Somebody was coming up the stairs.

Constance peered over the balustrade and held her breath. A servant she did not mind. But it was not a servant—it was H. Hedge. Her first impulse told her to turn and run; but the time was too short and the grip too heavy.

"Face it!" she told herself quickly.

But she did not want to face the efficiency man with the grip, so she tried to hold the latter behind her skirts. It was an awkward maneuver. The grip hammered at her heels as she resumed descent of the staircase. Then it slipped from her fingers. An instant later it struck her in the hollow of a knee. Constance staggered, swayed, and pitched forward, uttering a sharp cry.

She came to a halt half a dozen steps below. Tightly gripped around her waist was one arm of the efficiency man; the other was clinging desperately to the rail. Both of Constance's arms were around his neck. She could feel him struggling desperately to maintain a balance. With a gasping intake of his breath he presently achieved it. The grip shot past them, rounded a turn, and landed noisily on the floor of the basement hall.

"You servants are tremendously careless," growled H. Hedge as he settled Constance back on her feet.

"I'm not a servant!" she snapped, instantly regretting the disclosure.

He twisted his head to peer into her face. Their eyes were not six inches apart in the half light.

"It's Constance!" he exclaimed.

Never had the efficiency man called her that before.

"Yes, it's I!"

"You might have had a bad fall," he chided. "The front stairs are better lighted."

"I chose the back ones," she retorted.

"You're unusually early this morning."

"Possibly."

H. Hedge seemed willing to prolong the conversation.

"It's not eight yet," he remarked.

"I know it."

"Didn't you drop something?"

"Of course."

"I'll go down and get it for you." But he made no move.

"Don't bother. I'll get it."

"But I insist."

"No!"

He paused and considered.

"It's a nice morning," he observed irrelevantly.

"I believe so."

"Going for a walk?"

"Yes—no!"

"Why not say 'perhaps'—you get the same idea compressed into one word."

Constance was becoming anxious. She knew that Tommy Treadwell and his blue roadster were waiting below in the court-yard.

"Let me go!" she exclaimed.

Up to that point she had been too bewildered to notice that there had been no change in their positions since H. Hedge interrupted her headlong plunge.

"Not until you let me go," answered the efficiency man. "And then maybe—"

With a little cry of dismay she disengaged her arms from his neck.

"Let me go!" she repeated.

"Temporarily or permanently?" he asked with great deliberation.

"B-both!"

H. Hedge shook his head sadly.

"I never could do two things at once," he said. "It's unscientific even to try."

"Please—*please!*"

"In that case, temporarily," he declared, as he reluctantly withdrew the arm that held her close.

Constance's cheeks were fiery; she prayed that the gloom of the back stairs rendered all colors neutral.

"Thank you—for catching me," she said coldly, as she passed him.

"Thank you—for falling," he remarked happily, as he watched her finish the descent of the staircase.

For nearly a minute he stood there, gazing downward. He had seen Constance retrieve her grip and then hastily make her way toward the back door. He heard it close behind her. H. Hedge was puzzled.

Out in the courtyard stood a roadster, the engine idling wheezily. Tommy Treadwell was standing beside it, nervously tapping on a fender. His eyes lighted with happiness as he sighted the furred figure of Constance and he sprang forward to assist with the grip.

"You dear old brick," he cried.

"Morning, Tommy," said Constance.

She said it cordially enough, yet without that tender enthusiasm which ought to mark the salutation of a bride-to-be. Constance was flurried and preoccupied. Her mind was on the affair of the staircase—and H. Hedge. Why did he pester her so? And yet, if he

hadn't been there— Well, if he hadn't been there, she wouldn't have dropped the grip! So they were quits.

Tommy had seized the grip and swung it up on the baggage carrier in the rear, where he began an adjustment of the straps. Meantime, Constance stepped in and settled herself nervously in one of the bucket seats.

The efficiency man arrived in the courtyard while Tommy was still working at the grip. As Constance sighted him, she observed with a sinking heart that he was clothed in one of his ominous calms.

"Good morning," he said, as he walked across the open space.

Constance paled slightly and did not answer. Tommy Treadwell fumbled furiously at a strap and said nothing.

Hedge reached the side of the car, leaned over, pressed a button on the dash and turned off the ignition. The engine stopped.

"You let that car alone!" called Tommy angrily.

"All right; I will," said the efficiency man, stepping back a pace and eying Constance.

Tommy finished with the grip and came around to the side of the car.

"Well?" asked Hedge.

"Well?" echoed Tommy.

"What's the idea?"

The elopers exchanged swift glances and Tommy became emboldened.

"Well, if it'll give you any satisfaction to know,"

he announced, "Connie and I are going to be married."

"You surprise me," said the efficiency man. "I thought we had concluded that matter last night."

"You thought wrong. It's all settled."

"True; it's settled. Miss Brooke is not going to marry you."

Tommy flashed a dull red and there was a fighting look in his eye.

"Are you, Miss Brooke?" asked Hedge.

Constance compressed her lips and nodded.

"Which shows how error will persist," said the efficiency man, apparently talking to himself.

He stepped around to the rear of the car, unloosed a strap with a deft motion, and swung Constance's grip to the pavement.

"You may as well alight, Miss Brooke," he said.

Tommy Treadwell sprang forward and confronted him across the grip.

"You'd better keep out of this," he said grimly.

Tommy was quite a large young man, fully as large as Billy Brooke. He was taller than the efficiency man, and wider. But H. Hedge did not appear to be observant of Tommy's bulk just at that instant. He was looking only at his eyes.

"I can't keep out of it," he said simply. "It happens to be my duty to stay in it. Go in the house, Miss Brooke."

Constance remained immovable in her seat and maintained silence.

"You're the one that's going in the house," an-

nounced Tommy, clenching his fists. "And maybe they'll carry you in, if you don't get out of here in about ten seconds."

"I'm sorry you feel that way about it," said Hedge.

"Well, if you're sorry, beat it! If you don't there'll be trouble."

"Trouble? I'm sure there will be no trouble."

The efficiency man spoke in a deprecatory tone.

"I see that I've got to lick you," observed Tommy Treadwell, and there was no reluctance in his voice or manner.

"I'm afraid you'll have to."

Constance, who had listened to this colloquy with her face averted, now turned and bestowed a curious glance upon the efficiency man. If she expected to see his dark hair bristling and his eyes snapping, she was disappointed. He looked exactly as he always did in the library. She looked at Tommy. He was bristling beautifully.

"Here goes," said Tommy.

The efficiency man nodded.

CHAPTER XVII

DESERTING TO THE ENEMY

TOMMY TREADWELL let fly with his right arm, straight from the shoulder. Hedge did not have his hands up, but somehow the blow missed him entirely. Perhaps it was a case of Providence, or perhaps it was because he flirted his head a few inches to the right, accidentally. In any event, it missed him clean, and Tommy fell over the grip.

He arose, chagrined and mad clear through. This time he came in swinging. Just what the efficiency man did it is difficult to say, for he did not appear to be doing anything, except failing to get hit. He had his hands up, but he was not using them on Tommy. He was dodging punches, stopping punches, diverting punches, but he was contenting himself with that. His face wore a thoughtful look. He was not giving ground, but at the same time he seemed to be engaged in a purely negative way.

It is more exhausting to hit nothing than something, and Tommy Treadwell was hitting nothing at the rate of about sixty blows a minute. It did not improve either his wind or his temper. Constance, whose sympathies were curiously impartial, found herself wondering why a girl like herself could hit a punching-bag

so easily, while a big man like Tommy could not hit an efficiency man.

It went thus for some minutes, and finally the efficiency man began to speak.

"I do not know," he said, as a left swing passed over his head, "where you studied the art of boxing. But there is no doubt that you waste a tremendous amount of effort. You do not box efficiently. In the first place, you should not swing at all. It causes the fist to travel in an arc, rather than in the shortest way. Observe—you missed me again."

Tommy, indeed, had, and nearly lost his balance.

"Furthermore," added H. Hedge, as he sidestepped a fresh volley, "when you use the straight blow, you start it too low and too far back. You are prodigal with muscular effort, for which you do not obtain sufficient return, save in the form of exercise. Observe again. You should not start an uppercut from the ground; it takes too long. Don't start it below the waist."

Tommy, breathing now in gasps, charged again.

"Your footwork is bad," continued the efficiency man. "You travel a great distance, but you do not arrive. I don't wish to be rude, but it is my duty to say that you are clumsy. You are mastodonic, it is true; but the mastodon is an extinct animal. Why be extinct?"

Tommy was missing more obviously than ever. He was tired.

"Now, if I can, let me illustrate an efficient blow," said H. Hedge. "The truly efficient blow is conceived

with deliberate purpose and executed with due economy. It travels the shortest possible distance and, theoretically, carries with it the exact amount of necessary power. It may be delivered with either hand. In this case, we will assume that it is to be delivered with the left. Thus!"

The quick eye of Constance Brooke noted a fleeting and surprising change in the face of the efficiency man. It had been impassive until now. But as he said "thus," his jaw tightened, and his forehead contracted in a scowl that frightened her. His fist came from nowhere, but it landed somewhere, and his body was following it. Tommy Treadwell, already wabbling from his own efforts, turned half-way around, staggered, and fell flat on his face.

Constance uttered a cry and covered her eyes.

For an instant Tommy groped at the pavement; then began to arise, uncertainly.

"Don't make me do it again," said the efficiency man in a changed voice. "You haven't a chance."

Tommy, however, was not satisfied. He wheeled as he reached an erect position and closed in. So H. Hedge, again with the sudden scowl on his face, did it once more.

This time Tommy was longer in arising, and when he did it was to sit on the running-board of the car and rest his head in his hands.

"Now, if you please, Miss Brooke," said Hedge quietly, as he picked up her grip.

Constance, still averting her eyes, suddenly sprang from the car and dashed into the house, where she

ran madly upstairs, half choked with hysterical sobs. The efficiency man looked at the crest-fallen knight on the running-board and shook his head slowly.

"Sorry if I hurt you, old man," he said. "But, really, you mustn't try to marry Miss Brooke."

Then he, too, disappeared into the house.

"I wish," said the efficiency man on the day after New Year, "that you would reconsider."

He was addressing Constance Brooke, who had entered the "office" for the purpose of getting a book. Since the episode of the courtyard there had been no speech between them. Constance had been having meals sent to her room, a proceeding to which H. Hedge interposed no objection. He was in a mood to make concessions; he was thankful for the gloom of the back stairs.

Constance looked at him sharply and flushed.

"I have reconsidered," she said shortly. "I shall not marry."

The efficiency man's pulse skipped a beat, but he preserved an exterior calm.

"Very good," he nodded. "I presume you refer to Mr. Treadwell."

"To anybody—everybody!"

Her back was turned toward him and her fingers were running lightly over the books on a shelf.

"That is what I should call a wholesale reconsideration," he remarked judicially. "It is sufficiently inclusive to be ominous. The world will wear mourning. However—"

He paused as he noted the deepening pink of her ears.

"However—"

He paused again, this time to observe more closely the poise of her well-set head. Constance dropped a book on the floor and stooped to recover it.

"However, that is not what I wanted you to reconsider."

She picked up the book and faced him, her cheeks aflame. He was laughing at her, she knew; he had tricked her! Yet his face was impassive and wholly devoid of mirth. In fact, it was thoughtful. Even in her anger and confusion, she wondered what imperious necessity compelled H. Hedge to be so consistently intolerable.

"What I wanted you to reconsider," he explained, "was your decision not to assume the duties of a secretary in this establishment."

"Oh!" she said faintly.

Yes, he had tricked her! She was raging at herself for having fallen into the snare. Yet how was she to know that he did not intend to refer to the downfall of Tommy Treadwell? Her own mind had held no other thought for the past twenty-four hours. The whole business of trying to escape from serfdom had humiliated her. She was even angry at Tommy. Perhaps he had done his best—but why hadn't he done better? He was bigger than H. Hedge; he looked stronger. Why didn't he win? Perhaps efficiency really meant something, after all.

Yet, as she stood confused and exasperated, the tur-

moil of her mind suddenly resolved itself into calm. In that instant a great idea was born. Constance was utterly amazed at the discovery. The idea was nothing that she had groped or striven for; it simply flashed upon her. Yet it was the solution of the whole terrible problem!

"Buck up!" she whispered to herself. "Play the part. This is where you win!"

The efficiency man waited politely for her to reconsider the secretarial proposition.

She steeled herself to the task, summoned all the Spartan in her nature, and smiled at him.

"I had forgotten about your need of a secretary," she said.

"It still exists, Miss Brooke."

"Then show me what to do, please."

It came so suddenly that the efficiency man found it necessary to steady himself against the desk. He had been prepared for battle; not abject surrender.

"Why—er—yes," he said. "Glad to show you. There's a lot of back work, you know."

Constance, working at the other side of the library table, was a disconcerting vision, even to an efficiency man. There was a freshness in her cheeks that suggested a rose-garden. Her gray eyes were steady and serene. Tendrils of hair curled about her ears in a unique way, H. Hedge decided, for he could not remember having observed a similar phenomenon before. She had a firm, assured way of using her hands that astonished him. They were quite as capable of filing papers as they were of punching a leather bag, in

addition to which they were exceptionally well manicured.

But it was when she smiled across at him and frowned in occasional perplexity over some new problem of efficiency that H. Hedge made up his mind there is hope for the worst sinner in Christendom. Nearly everybody can smile, but not like Constance Brooke. For instance, do you know anybody who, by merely smiling, can make you go upstairs, brush your hair, use a whiskbroom on your coat, and critically inspect your collar, just under the chin? It takes a very extraordinary smile to do that.

Constance possessed it. Of course it is not to be suspected that she was conscious of employing it. Yet it produced all those singular results, so far as the efficiency man was concerned.

Never a word passed about Tommy Treadwell. The new secretary had apparently forgotten the matter in the intense absorption of her work.

Alice made the initial discovery the very first day. She was home from school early, and, glancing in at the library as she passed through the hall, was rooted in her tracks by the spectacle of Constance standing at a file-case with her hands full of papers. The efficiency man was at her elbow and was talking glibly about something; Alice could not hear the words. It was the attentive, almost eager, attitude of Constance that chiefly amazed her.

Whatever Connie was doing, she was doing willingly—*and she was taking orders!*

The younger sister stole upstairs, a prey to per-

plexity and foreboding. What she had seen was beyond all belief. It was such an inexplicable thing that she did not even dare to share the secret with Billy, far less to mention the discovery to Constance. But it kept Alice awake for at least an hour after she went to bed.

Billy did not become aware of any unusual development until the day following. It was the middle of the forenoon when he blundered into the library, intending to make a final plea for gasoline money. Constance was sitting at the desk, and the efficiency man was pacing the floor, talking.

Billy halted and opened his mouth involuntarily.

"And make a note of this," H. Hedge was saying. "To notify the servants that hereafter all orders for supplies, in excess of one dollar, must be certified at the office before being delivered to tradesmen."

Constance nodded as she put it down.

"Anything I can do for you?" asked Hedge, as he observed Billy.

"I—hum."

"I didn't understand. Repeat, please."

Billy coughed and stared at his sister, who glanced up, evidently annoyed at the interruption.

"Wha—what are you doing, Connie?" he blurted.

"Working," she answered shortly. "What are *you* doing?"

The question was disconcerting, and Billy instinctively quailed under it.

"Working?" he repeated dully.

"W-o-r-k-i-n-g," spelled Constance coldly. "What was the last, Mr. Hedge?"

She smiled up at the efficiency man and poised a ready pencil.

"Just a moment, Miss Brooke," he answered. Then, turning to Billy: "Your sister has taken up her secretarial work in a most admirable spirit. May I ask when you will assume your clerkship?"

The question was brutal, not because it involved work, but for the reason that it suggested comparison. A secretary may be a very important person. Presidents of the United States have secretaries, who are commonly more important than cabinet officers. If they were not, they would be abolished. A clerk may also be important, but the title lacks something. There is nothing robust or dignified about it. "Secretary Jones" is a personage, even if he is as colorless and insipid as warm water. "Clerk Smith" is nobody, even if he is large, beefy, and belligerent, with an intellect of suitable proportions.

Billy Brooke winced at the clerkship, but he did not address himself to the efficiency man.

"You mean to tell me, Connie, that you are *working?*"

"Certainly."

"You've—quit?"

"No; begun."

"But—Connie!"

Billy found no consolation in the eyes of his sister. They were cold and steady. It was obvious that she was annoyed at the interruption.

"We are still on orders for supplies," she reminded H. Hedge. "Is there something more under that head?"

Billy faced about and hurried from the room. He paused in the hall and drew a deep breath. The Brooke family was disgraced!

It did not add to the peace of Billy's mind to discover what he suspected—that, by working, Constance had regained her daily allowance. His own was suspended, pending that time when he should decide to assume his clerical duties. Thus the two Brooke sisters were again in funds, even though of limited size, while their brother remained penniless.

Billy and Alice hesitated to speak what was in the mind of each, but one day the tacitly maintained wall of reserve broke down, and they unburdened their thoughts in a far corner of the gymnasium.

"She's quit us," said Billy. "I hate to say it, but what else can you make out of it?"

"Nothing," admitted Alice.

"Have you said anything to her about it?" asked Billy, after a pause.

Alice shook her head.

"I was hoping it wouldn't last," she said. "I thought maybe Connie just needed a little money very badly, and that after she got it she'd come back on our side again. So I haven't said a word. But she seems to be worse than ever now."

"He was reading to her out of a book this afternoon," growled Billy. "Something about cutting out lost motion. What do you know about it?"

Alice sighed and made a helpless gesture.

"It leaves us out on a limb," continued Billy. "It was three against one until this started; now it's fifty-fifty. How can we expect to win out?"

"We can't—alone. Connie isn't fair."

"Do you notice the way they talk together at the table, just as if we weren't there? You'd think they'd get enough of each other in the library. But they're not satisfied with that. I tell you, we're not getting a square deal!"

"Well, what can we do, Billy?"

He kicked a medicine-ball half way across the gymnasium floor and strode over to a window, as if he might discover a solution by staring out at the world.

"She owes us an explanation," he announced firmly.

Alice nodded emphatically.

"Why, she owes us an apology!"

"Yes," agreed Alice. "After all the fighting we've done, we ought not to be treated this way. Not for three dollars and thirty-three cents a day, anyhow."

"So far as the money part goes, you're getting yours," growled her brother. "I don't get a jitney."

"I get mine because I go to school and I'm not supposed to work," retorted Alice defensively. "Anyhow, I don't get as much as I used to."

"The least she could do would be to split with me. Not that I'd ask her; but she ought to offer it, anyhow." Poverty had not yet pinched all the pride out of Billy. "What makes me mad," he added, "is that E. E. goes around holding Connie up as a model to

us. He hands me that stuff every time he gets an opening. He'll go too far some day."

Billy took a swing at the punching bag, in evident illustration of his remark. The act did not seem to impress Alice. She remembered the day that H. Hedge was to be ejected—and wasn't. Also she remembered the extraordinary Battle of Brooke Courtyard.

"Let's talk to her to-night," declared Billy.

"And we'll tell her she hasn't any right to desert us, particularly after she signed the declaration with us."

"You notice, though, that she was the first to quit on it."

"That's so," assented Alice. "Well, anyhow she ought not to quit now, particularly after what happened at the party and the day after."

The dissension in the ranks of the Brooke family had, indeed, reached a serious stage when it called for the institution of a court of inquiry by Billy and Alice. Under normal circumstances Constance was recognized as a ringleader, even though she was not the senior member of the trio. They missed her inspiration and counsel; they felt that the center of the little army had broken, leaving the wings isolated and upsupported.

"Remember now," cautioned Billy. "Don't let her put anything over on us. Connie's a good talker when she wants to be."

"She won't put anything over on *me*," declared Alice stoutly.

CHAPTER XVIII

A DEEP-LAID PLOT

"WELL, out with it," said Constance impatiently, after Billy had started twice to speak, only to wind up with a cough.

The three Brookes were in Constance's sitting-room, and the door was closed and locked.

"We don't like the way you're acting," observed Alice bluntly.

"About what?"

"Everything."

"Oh, start one thing at a time," counseled Constance. " 'Everything' is too general."

"We don't like this business of you going to work," blurted Billy.

Constance surveyed her brother with a faint smile on her lips.

"I shouldn't think *you* would," she remarked.

"And you're siding with him against us!"

"Really?"

"Yes, and you treat him as if he was just as good as we are," complained Alice. "You treat him better than you treat us."

"I'm civil to him," admitted Constance.

"Civil! I should say you were! Every time he

smirks at you, you smile back at him," declared Billy. "Is that part of your work?"

Under ordinary circumstances that remark would have brought from Constance a withering blast of angry words. But she merely smiled at her brother.

"Next?" she said quietly.

"You're obeying all the rules that you said you'd never obey," snapped Alice, continuing the indictment.

Constance pursed her lips and whistled the opening bars of a popular chorus.

"And you're not giving us a square deal," added Billy. "You're siding with him."

The defendant did not quail under the accusation, but regarded her brother with unfathomable calm.

"Yes—you quit, while we go on fighting," said Alice relentlessly.

"Anything else?"

"Isn't that enough?"

"I didn't want you to overlook anything while you were at it," advised Constance meekly. "We may as well get it all over with at one sitting."

"I guess you know what we mean," grumbled Billy. "The whole business is, that you've deserted our side and gone over to him."

"Yes, and you let him go walking with you this afternoon," supplemented Alice. "Connie, he acts as if he was getting mushy over you!"

"And you act as if you didn't care," was Billy's final contribution.

Constance arose from her chair and took a turn about the room, her hands clasped behind her, her

head bowed in reflection. Once a smile flitted across her face. Billy and Alice watched her gloomily. It did not seem that she had been properly impressed with the gravity of her disloyalty. Presently she faced them and shook her head sadly.

"You poor, stupid things," she said.

"What!"

"I said stupid—both of you. It's evident that you are hopeless."

Billy gaped and Alice frowned.

"You say I'm a quitter," observed Constance after a pause. "Why, *you* are the quitters!"

The members of the court-martial stiffened in their chairs and stared at the defendant.

"Yes, quitters," she continued mercilessly. "All you've done for days and days is to sulk around. And you don't call sulking fighting, do you? You haven't put up a fight for two weeks. I'm doing it all!"

Alice and Billy looked at each other, overcome with bewilderment.

"Now, see here," said Constance, drawing up a chair and sitting down to face them, "I see that I've got to explain this thing to you in words of one syllable, so that you can understand. You both did a certain amount of fighting, and where did it land you? Nowhere. You, Billy, were going to throw this man out of the house. I didn't see you do it. I only heard you give him five minutes more, and that was at least a month ago, if not more. About all you've done since then is to make a loud noise."

Alice nodded, forgetting that she was a member of the court.

"As for you, Alice," added Constance, turning upon her, "what have *you* done? All I can recall is that you invented a hunger strike and made us all sign a perfectly ridiculous paper. Did we get anything by threatening to starve ourselves? Nothing but an appetite."

It was Billy's turn to assent.

"So," continued the defendant, "after we have all made threats and protests and complaints, you two finally give up and leave it all to me."

"Did you call trying to run away with Tommy Treadwell part of the fight?" demanded Billy.

"Absolutely. I was going to marry him on your account!"

"On *our* account!" chorused the amazed court.

"Exactly. Tommy was going to furnish a home for all of us, and I was coming back to take you away from here."

Billy and Alice were dazed at the revelation.

"But that's all off now," remarked the junior member of the court finally.

"All off," agreed Constance. "I shall never marry Tommy now. I might have, if you had showed the least symptoms of keeping up the fight; but I am losing my sympathy for you."

"Well, what in blazes *are* you doing?" demanded Billy.

"Fighting," answered Constance sweetly.

"Surrendering, you mean."

"No, my dears; only seeming to."

Constance leaned back in her chair and surveyed the pair smilingly. She wanted to give the announcement time to sink in.

"And I think I have already taken the first line of trenches," she added placidly.

Billy shook his head in puzzlement.

"I give it up," he said. "What's the answer?"

"The wiles of woman!"

Constance indulged in another pause, for the purpose of emphasis. Then she arose and started pacing again, and as she paced she talked.

"Oh, can't you see it? Must I explain everything with a diagram? So you thought I had surrendered, did you? Why, I've just started the biggest fight of all! And it's going to be a winner! You thought I was beginning to like Mr. H. Hedge, did you? Well, perhaps that's a compliment. I must be doing it even better than I thought. And you think he's getting mushy over me? Why, I'm winning already!

"Like him!" she cried. "Why, you poor dears, I *detest* him! Yes; more than ever before. And before I get through with him he's going to be the saddest-looking efficiency man that ever ran a household with a two-foot rule."

"Oh, gee!" murmured Alice fervently, overwhelmed at the disclosure.

"They say it's wicked to hate, but I guess I'm wicked," continued Constance, as she warmed up to her subject. "I'm going to bring that man to his knees, if it's the last thing I do on this earth, I'm

going to make him eat out of my hand. I'll humble him; just you see. I'm going to have this house back where it started, and I'm going to make him do it!

"There's only one way to fight this man. You've got to begin by fooling him. *I'll* fool him. Watch me. I've got him fooled now. He thinks I'm a willing little convert. A convert! Me! Doesn't that show how easy he is, if you only know how to go at him? Why, I'm just about as much in love with economy and efficiency as I am with the measles. You leave it to me! I'm not asking any help in this fight. You've all tried your schemes. Now, you just stand aside and let me try mine. And don't you ever call me a traitor again."

The court stirred uneasily.

"We didn't say you were a traitor," mumbled Billy.

"Well, you said I was a quitter and a deserter. It's all the same. And right at a time when I was fighting hardest of all!"

"We didn't understand," explained Billy.

"Then why didn't you ask me, instead of getting together and accusing me?" demanded Constance, pursuing her advantage.

"That's what you should have done, Billy," said Alice.

The look that he gave his younger sister was too amazed and reproachful to be accompanied by words.

"Oh, don't throw it all on Billy," flashed Constance scornfully. "You behaved just as badly as he did, Alice. Neither one of you trusted me. I'm ashamed of you both."

The indignation of Constance had reached the virtuous point, and she had no intention of allowing it to recede.

"We're—we're sorry," muttered Alice.

"Important campaigns are not concluded in a day, or a week," observed Constance with much wisdom. "Look how long they've been at it at Verdun. This campaign is only in the first stage. The beginning is where I make H. Hedge thoroughly believe that I sympathize and am willing to coöperate. Then, when I get him in that mood, I begin to take what I want. He is at my mercy. Don't you see? That's the time that I begin to twist him—"

Constance finished the sentence by holding up a little finger and wiggling it, while she regarded it speculatively.

"Splendid," said Alice. "Splendid!"

Already she could see the limp form of the efficiency man wrapped around Constance's pink digit. Billy was less enthusiastic.

"When he's at your mercy," he asked, "do we get some of the rake-off?"

"Of course. I'm not as selfish as you think, Billy."

"And do I get my allowance?"

"If you don't, I'll tell you what I'll do," declared Constance. "I'll pay it myself, after father gets home."

"I can't live that long."

"Baby! You're getting along without it now. If you want to get it to-morrow all you have to do is to go to work."

Billy shook his head. The idea of defying the efficiency man was not to work, no matter if the heavens fell upon the Brooke mansion.

"Well," said Alice thoughtfully, "I'm for you, Connie. I think it's a great idea. But isn't it terribly hard to be nice to him?"

Constance did not answer immediately. The question was rather sudden and came from an unexpected angle. She had not considered that exact phase of the situation. As she reflected upon it, she was not wholly certain that the splendid campaign upon which she had embarked involved all the renunciation and self-effacement that naturally belonged to it. The battle at times went on peacefully as a dress parade. She was not always conscious of suffering and wounds. Life in the trenches sometimes had pangless hours, rather to her own surprise.

"It's very hard," she answered.

"I suppose you expect us to help," said Billy.

"I haven't the least concern whether you do or not, my dear. I shall win, in either event."

"Are we invited to see the grand climax—when you step on his neck?"

"Yes; I'll invite you to that—if there's time. Of course, it may come suddenly."

"But when he finds out what you've been doing. How about it then?"

"Then it'll be too late—for him," declared Constance firmly. "When I pull the string E. E. is going to dance, whether he likes it or not. And that's the time the Brooke family gets what is coming to it."

"How about father, when he gets back? Didn't he put this guy up to all this?"

"Leave father to me. He's the easiest of all."

Billy spent several minutes in thought. He was somewhat jealous of the single-handed fight, yet he did not see how to obtain a participation. Employing wiles against H. Hedge was something out of his line, unless wiles were represented by a baseball-bat or a paving-stone.

"Well, it's no affair of mine," he said at last. "You went into this thing without consulting us, and it's your lookout."

"Of course," Constance assured him.

"But take care if you don't win."

"But she will win!" exclaimed Alice confidently.

"All I want you to do," concluded Constance, "is to let me handle this thing. And don't on any account blurt out something that will give him an inkling of what is going on. If he suspects, the whole thing will fail."

"Rely on us," said her sister. "We'll never tell."

CHAPTER XIX

SOME OUTPOSTS

THERE was consternation below stairs. Mary wrapped her hands in her apron and sat staring moodily at the floor.

"Wurrkin'," she muttered. "She's thot desprit thot she's wurrkin'! The poor child! An' wurrkin' for *him!*"

"A shame!" said Elvira.

Mary looked up quickly.

"A shame, say ye? An' by what right do you say things like thot? Who are ye to be sayin' 'tis a shame for the young misthress to do annything?"

"But, you said yourself—"

"L'ave be," commanded Mary sternly. "Whin ye've been in this house eighteen years there's things ye can say, an' whin ye've been here tin years there's things ye can't say. Kape yer place, Elvira, an' be puttin' no shame on Miss Connie."

Elvira pursed her lips primly and fell silent.

"Ay," said Mary after a heavy pause, "'tis a shame to be seein' the poor child wurrkin' the inds av her fingers off, hour in an' hour out. 'Tis typewritin' he has her, too—the scut! The poor dear, thryin' to

punch kays, like me thryin' to punch a clock. 'Tis the divil's shame."

Elvira kept her peace, mildly wondering at the inequality of privilege in speech.

"The man has a heart av stone," announced Mary presently.

"He's a wicked man," assented Elvira.

"Wicked, is it? Niver let me hear ye say thot again. 'Tis a sin to be sittin' in judgmint, Elvira. He's ejjicated, which is more nor you an' me, an' he's a gintleman born. 'Tis wicked av ye to call him wicked."

Mary devoted another period to gloomy reflection.

"'Tis wicked crool the way he dhrives her," she declared presently. "But 'tis quare, too, the way she smiles at him. 'Tis Horace says thot. Like enough he's lyin', maybe. 'Tis wan av his ways. An' did ye mind him this noonday, whin he comes down from upsthairs an' says thot the poor dear is makin' out reports, like you an' me an' the rist av us, an' puttin' thim in boxes an' dhrawers an' invelopes, ag'inst the Day of Judgmint?"

"Perhaps he was lyin'," admitted Elvira.

"Lyin'! 'Tis like he was tellin' the truth! How is it ye're so quick to call it lyin'? 'Twas Alice dear was tellin' me the same thing hersilf. An' why shouldn't it be thrue? I've no patience with ye, Elvira."

Matilda looked up from her sewing, an unmistakable sign that her New England conscience was in a ferment.

"I have heard him speak to Miss Connie," she averred, "in a way that no gentleman would address a lady."

Mary snorted.

"There ye go," she said. "'Tis gintleman this an' lady thot. How is it ye know so much about the ginthry, Matilda? Don't be forgittin' ye're a wurrkin' woman. Gintleman! W'u'd ye call Giovanni a gintleman? Like enough. Ay, an' Garibaldi, the wan he does be talkin' about. 'Tis not for ye to be tellin' how a gintleman sphakes to a lady. 'Tis for none av us."

Matilda curled her lips and resumed her sewing.

"He has the manners av a Dublin hack-dhriver," added Mary after due thought. "An' the day he towld me to punch the clock, if it wasn't I was a lady, there'd be wan scientist sayin' 'Docther, is it like I'll walk again?"

There was something approaching consternation upstairs as well. Although Alice and Billy watched the campaign and kept the great secret, their misgivings of final success were not to be easily allayed. Their own fate was so directly involved that frequent reconnoissances were necessary.

Alice proved to be the most efficient spy. She reported to Billy on a number of occasions that the relations between H. Hedge and his secretary were of the most cordial character.

Alice was impatient at repeated evidences of amicable hours between the chief plotter and the victim. She still had confidence in her sister, who usually

achieved what she set out to perform; but it seemed to Alice that the patience of Constance was something more than human.

Billy was less persistent in his observations, but such as he made were to the same general effect. Once, he resolved, for the sake of a better opportunity to watch the battle, that he would assume his clerkship. But the resolution melted away when he tried to steel himself for the final degradation. He told himself it was not a horror of work *per se;* merely a shrinking from work *per* Hedge.

A most extraordinary day came when Constance, having been excessively diligent during a whole forenoon, remarked after luncheon that, if Mr. Hedge did not absolutely require her assistance for a few hours, she would attend to some matters of shopping.

The efficiency man not only gave a ready consent, but he went to the amazing length of suggesting that he also had certain errands which called him outside the house, and suggested that he "might be permitted" to accompany her as far as their paths coincided. Might be permitted!

Constance could with difficulty believe her ears. He was delivering himself into her hands! Could he go shopping with her? He could—and a radiant smile went with the permission.

The occasion, being of a momentous character, required the services of the Brooke limousine. Alice, from an upper window, witnessed their departure, which was effected with the full expeditionary escort of chauffeur and footman. She stared until the big

car disappeared from sight down the avenue, then flung herself weakly into a big chair and indulged in a long period of thought.

Constance began the campaign with feints intended to conceal major operations, and at the same time to test the resistance of the enemy. Gloves were a feint, for instance. The enemy followed her into the glove-shop. He did not intend to be obtrusive, but he appeared to be interested in gloves. He watched the selection closely; once he made a suggestion, which was, of course, accepted on the spot.

Constance laid aside several pairs, after a deliberate examination of many dozen, and then casually inquired the price. She frowned doubtfully when the amount was mentioned.

"So much?" she murmured in a surprised tone. "Wait, please."

Followed then an examination of the contents of her purse. It was not by any means an empty purse, for Constance had been saving her daily allowance, chiefly because diligence as an efficiency secretary had afforded little opportunity for spending. The examination resulted in a shake of the head. She could buy the gloves easily; but there were other things to buy.

With an almost inaudible sigh she lifted four pairs of gloves from the approved selections and handed them back to the clerk.

Among them, perhaps merely by chance, was the pair concerning which H. Hedge had displayed interest.

"I will take the remainder," she said.

The efficiency man gave a brisk shake of his head, reached for the condemned gloves, and placed them back on the pile.

"We have an account here," he remarked. "The gloves may be charged."

Constance was not quite sure whether she was surprised or not. She was always somewhat fearful of initial success.

"I expected to pay for them," she said meekly, still fumbling her purse.

"Charge the gloves," commanded H. Hedge sharply, addressing the clerk. "Wrap them up."

Constance closed her purse with seeming reluctance.

"Why—thank you," she said.

"I see no need," he answered. "There is an account here, is there not?"

"But—"

Constance checked herself, wondering if it were wise to finish the sentence.

"But what?"

"We should have brought the standardization book and the requisition blanks," she faltered.

The efficiency man eyed her narrowly, but her face was impassive.

"The records can be made out when we return home," he answered in a faintly annoyed tone. "I shall keep a memorandum."

Whereupon he put down six pairs of gloves, mak-

ing use of a small loose-leaf note-book that was his inseparable companion.

As they left the glover's and reentered the car Constance was trying to get a grip on herself.

"Steady," she whispered to her beating heart. "This is only a little skirmish. It's not even an outpost taken. Don't be too sure."

"Where next?" he demanded.

Constance pursed her lips doubtfully and studied the extended tip of her shoe.

"Shoes?" he asked.

"How wonderful you are at guessing," she murmured. "Really, I need a pair of walking shoes."

H. Hedge left her in the shoe-shop while he returned to the sidewalk and delivered a sharp lecture to Frank, the chauffeur, for allowing the motor to idle and thereby consume gasoline.

"It saves the starter, sir," explained Frank. "Using the starter runs out the batteries."

"Use the crank," advised the efficiency man. "It's good exercise."

Frank said that he would, but did not explain how he would most like to use it.

Back in the shop, he found Constance regarding three pairs of shoes with fond eyes.

"I don't know which to take," she said, looking up with a smile.

"Which are the walking shoes?"

"That's the trouble. They all are."

He examined the shoes critically.

"You do a good deal of walking," he observed at length. "I've noticed it."

"Yes," she admitted ruefully.

"It's economy not to wear a single pair of shoes continuously," he added. "That has been demonstrated."

"I—I think I have heard that."

"Of course." Then to the clerk: "Wrap them all up."

Constance bent her head and began fishing in her purse with dutiful anxiety. She did not care to look up, fearing that the efficiency man might truly interpret the gleam in her eyes.

"And charge them," she heard him say in his usual crisp tones.

Back in the limousine, they rode in silence for several minutes, the ogre frowning at the bundles that lay on the seat in front of them. He had made another entry in the note-book.

Constance judged that it was time to test the defense again.

"I—we have already spent more than I've saved," she said sadly.

She had planned the sentence carefully, purposely changing the "I" to "we."

"The purchases are being charged," he reminded her, still glaring at the bundles.

"It's—it's very kind of you."

"Not at all. Understand, Miss Brooke, that economy and efficiency are not synonymous with a policy of never spending any money."

"Truly?" Her astonishment was by no means feigned.

"Of course. I thought you understood. There is a complete chapter on that feature in the book I loaned you."

"So there is. I'd forgotten."

"Necessary expenditures, in order to preserve efficiency, are always economy. You needed gloves and shoes, did you not?"

"Indeed, yes!"

"Very well. Then we have been practising economy and living up to our principles. Economy, I may add, in mere dollars, frequently costs more than extravagance. Note the case of your New Year party.

"It would have been extravagance to pay two hundred dollars, say, for the employment of musicians and the purchase of indigestible refreshments. But it was economy, combined with efficiency and the principle of safety first, to spend three hundred dollars for a specialist and nurse in order to protect the health of the household."

Constance opened her eyes wide, but was too amazed to speak. So he had spent three hundred dollars on that! She made a mental note that H. Hedge would pay dearly.

"You appreciate the force of it, do you not?" he demanded.

"I? Oh, assuredly!"

"Of course. It's obvious."

But as he glanced at the bundles again his frown returned.

"Well, where next?"

"I wasn't sure there was going to be any next."

"It's a waste of time, gasoline, and tires to spend an afternoon merely shopping for gloves and shoes," he declared with emphasis. "Scientific shopping contemplates the purchase of all necessities within the shortest space of time and with a minimum of travel. What else?"

Constance stole a glance at him and paused irresolutely. Unconsciously she patted her hat.

"Not that?" he exclaimed in alarm.

Now she looked at him squarely and smiled.

"No, not that," she agreed. "Was it—terribly expensive?"

"Moderately so," he admitted. Then hastily: "But not extravagant. There is a marked difference. I draw the line at extravagance. But, as I said before, economy is not wholly gauged by dollars. I consider the hat an economy, all things taken into account. Do you find it a useful, practical hat?"

"Oh, tremendously so!" she assured him.

He had spoken quite solemnly, but when Constance next ventured a glance she detected a faint grin on the efficiency man's features. He froze it immediately when he discovered that she was observing him.

"Well, where next?" he repeated.

Constance decided upon another strategic move.

"Honestly, I don't know," she said. "What do you think I want—I mean need?"

He studied her until the scrutiny became a trifle embarrassing. There was a penetrating and inclusive

quality in his survey that caused her to flush faintly. She wished H. Hedge was not quite so thorough in his examination, yet she was conscious that his painstaking interest was not displeasing.

"I think you need a set of furs," he said.

She beamed at him in sudden bewilderment. How could he possibly have guessed. How could he be so wonderfully human? And why—oh, why couldn't he always be like that?"

"You are a mind-reader, Mr. Hedge," she affirmed. "You almost frighten me."

"No, I am not a mind-reader," said the efficiency man positively. "But you see, the other day I noticed that your muff and boa might easily, even profitably, be replaced with a set more in harmony with your fur coat."

"When in the world did you notice that?" she asked in surprise.

"On the back stairs."

Constance turned pink. It was the first time he had even alluded, in the most indirect manner, to the morning when he had robbed Tommy Treadwell of a bride. She herself had brought up the subject once, by mistake, but H. Hedge had never reopened it.

"I did not know you were so observing," she said for the sake of speech.

"It is my business to observe. Where do you buy your furs?"

She gave a direction to the chauffeur and presently the efficiency man found himself in one of those Fifth

Avenue shops that resemble nothing so much as a palatial private home.

Half an hour later, truly dazed, Constance emerged with a silver fox skin around her neck and a great muff that matched it. Furtively she pinched herself to make sure it was not a fantasy of the brain.

What it cost she had not the least idea; that was a matter between the efficiency man and the furrier. While she knew it was a splendid triumph for the campaign, she was somewhat troubled about it. She wondered if there was a counter campaign under way, conducted by H. Hedge. She made a mental memorandum to be careful, watchful, always cautious.

"It's five o'clock," announced the efficiency man. "Shall we drive in the park or take tea?"

"You decide," she murmured.

"We'll drive."

It would have seemed logical, after his amazing afternoon's record, that the efficiency man should be in gay and trifling mood. He was not. He indulged in long silences, broken only by monosyllables, yet marked by frequent and disconcerting inspections of Constance. Sometimes he glowered at the bundles on the front seat. There was something grim in his mood.

Once he turned to her abruptly and said almost sharply:

"I wish you would wear blue more frequently."

Constance widened her eyes, then stammered:

"Wh-why?"

"Suits you."

"And—and do you like it, Mr. Hedge?"

He did not appear to hear, having relapsed into another of his silences.

The number of parcels which were removed from the car as it stopped at last in front of the Brooke mansion caused Horace to display a surprise that is inexcusable in any experienced butler. H. Hedge did not notice this, however.

He walked directly to the library and began going through the afternoon mail. Constance hurried to her rooms, where she soon had Matilda bringing out for inspection every dinner gown that she possessed.

She chose a blue one.

The efficiency man had little to say during the evening meal. He did not fail to observe the gown, but he made no comment, as Constance rather hoped he would. He was unnaturally preoccupied, so that he forgot to tell Horace that he took seven unnecessary steps in walking from the sideboard to the table.

In the library, after dinner, Hedge was so unsociable that Constance presently drifted into the music-room, where she played for an hour or so. The efficiency man sat at the big desk working furiously over books and reports. He did not once send for his secretary.

When finally he reached the matter of accounts he took his memorandum-book from his pocket and began a swift tabulation.

The result astonished him so that he checked it up twice, only to become annoyed at the time wasted in verifying a simple sum of addition.

"Economy, just the same," he muttered, scowling

at the figures. "It was a matter of need. I made that perfectly clear to her. There is no possibility that she misunderstood. If I find she did I'll not fail to make it absolutely plain."

He chewed an unlighted cigar for several minutes, still scowling.

"It's just possible she got the idea," he said, "that money was being spent in the same old reckless fashion. She won't have it long. I'll get it out of her head. I'll do it now!"

He arose with decision and strode across the hall in the direction of the music-room.

Constance was still sitting at the piano, her back toward him. The efficiency man halted on the threshold, listening and watching. She was quite unconscious of his presence. What she played he did not know. It was alternately lively and melancholy.

Her body swayed slightly with the music, rhythmically, buoyantly, sometimes droopingly, as though she were a part of the melody itself. H. Hedge swayed likewise, although he did not know it.

Then, after a little, as the music began to quaver and die away, the efficiency man turned noiselessly and tiptoed back to the library.

"I'll tell her to-morrow," he said.

CHAPTER XX

A MATTER OF COLOR

BILLY BROOKE walked into the office with so little of his old-time swagger that the efficiency man instantly noted the change.

"See here, Hedge, I want to talk to you," he said.

"All right, Brooke; sit down."

Hedge and Brooke faced each other.

"This is as man to man," said Billy.

"Very good. But you're not much past twenty-one."

Billy stared straight into the eyes of the efficiency man.

"You can cut that out," he said with an angry flush. "I know I'm not as old as you are. But for this talk, forget it."

"Right. It's man to man," said H. Hedge.

"I don't like you, Hedge," observed Billy, after a short pause.

The efficiency man nodded, and instantly liked Billy better than he had before.

"None of us like you."

This was acknowledged with another nod.

"You've raised the devil in this house."

H. Hedge considered this briefly, then smiled.

"I don't admit it, Brooke. But we'll not argue it. Go ahead."

"You've been particularly rotten to me. I've stood for a lot. I guess I'm easy going. I threatened to throw you out—and I didn't. Maybe you thought I was afraid."

The efficiency man made a deprecatory gesture, but said nothing.

"I don't know whether I can lick you or not," added Billy with fine frankness. "You licked Tommy Treadwell, and he licked me—once. But that doesn't mean I wouldn't have a try at you."

"Of course not."

"On my own account, I'm willing to let things stall along. The old man'll be back before a great while, and I guess maybe I can stand it till then."

H. Hedge nodded understandingly.

"But I'm talking on Connie's account now."

"Oh!"

Billy paused and studied the efficiency man through slightly narrowed eyes. He was unaccustomed to much serious speech, and the effort was plainly embarrassing to him. Yet he kept resolutely on.

"You treated Connie in a way that was shameful. It makes me sick when I think that I stood for it. And Alice, too; but I'm talking about Connie now."

"Sure. Go on."

"And Connie's the finest girl in the whole world!" Billy blurted, leaning forward in his chair.

H. Hedge made a sign of assent.

"But you don't treat her that way any more!"

Billy punctuated the indictment with an uplifted finger. The efficiency man regarded him gravely.

"Now—this is what I am getting at—*why* don't you treat her that way any more?"

"Because," answered H. Hedge, "to quote your own remark, she's the finest girl in the whole world."

"Ah—I thought so."

Billy settled back in his chair with the air of a lawyer who has just performed an expert piece of taxidermy upon a witness. The efficiency man preserved his calm.

"Yes, I thought so," repeated Billy, wagging his head. "That's the reason you've been letting her have whatever she wants. I've been watching you, Hedge. Now, listen; I don't care anything about that part of it. Anything Connie can get she's entitled to.

"She isn't getting half enough, anyhow. And whether I get anything or not doesn't make any difference. Or Alice, either. But you don't want to get any fool notions in your head about my sister. Understand?"

"I don't have fool notions," observed H. Hedge placidly.

"Well, you just admitted that you thought she was the finest girl in the world."

"Is that a fool notion?"

Billy flushed.

"Oh, well; you know I don't mean it that way. I'm not always very good at expressing myself. Of course it's not a fool notion—but what business have you got to have it?"

"I never looked at it from that standpoint," admitted the efficiency man in a judicial tone. "Let's debate it."

"No, we won't. You don't get me tied up into anything like that. Just see here: even if you were friendly with the family, you're not in Connie's class."

"Hum," remarked H. Hedge with the slightest trace of a flush in his face. "That sounds a trifle snobbish. Are you a snob, Brooke?"

Billy shuffled his feet and frowned.

"I didn't mean it exactly that way, either," he said. "I don't intend to be a snob—I'm not. But what I'm trying to get at is, Connie's used to going with a different kind of a crowd—not your kind at all. So it won't do you any good to get foolish over her. That's what I mean."

"I'm not foolish over her."

"You can't bluff—I *know*."

"Oh, all right, if you know."

"And I don't want you to annoy her."

H. Hedge betrayed sincere surprise.

"I wasn't aware that I had," he said. "Did she say so?"

"No, of course not. Girls don't talk about those things. But anybody can see."

"I get you. Tell me some more."

"Well, that's about all. I'm just giving you warning, Hedge."

"Good of you, Brooke. What do you want me to do—bark at her?"

"No!"

Billy almost shouted it.

"I just want you to leave her alone, that's all. Keep away from her."

"Well, we're both living in the same house and eating at the same table. So that will be somewhat difficult," observed the efficiency man.

"She's in here all the time working," growled Billy.

"I can't force her to work if she refuses."

"Maybe she is willing—but she hasn't any use for you, Hedge."

The efficiency man pondered the observation in calmness.

"That's quite possible," he said cheerfully. "But if your sister wants to keep up her secretarial work, I can't prevent it. Rather, I don't intend to. It's excellent training for her."

Billy remained silent for a minute, wrestling with his soul.

"Look here, Hedge," he exclaimed suddenly. "If somebody has to do this work, I'll do it myself—anything to keep Connie from being bothered."

"Well, Brooke, that sounds fair enough. But there's this about it: at present your sister's work is satisfactory, and I'm not justified in discharging her without cause. If it becomes unsatisfactory, I'll fire her. Then the job is yours. Or if she chooses to resign, it's yours, too. You can't expect any more than that."

Billy was stumped. H. Hedge's offer surely sounded fair, yet it was unsatisfactory.

"Why don't you give her some other job?" he said.

"What, for instance?"

"Oh, anything—bossing the servants."

The efficiency man shook his head.

"That's part of my job," he said. "I love it too much to surrender it. Your servants are a joy, particularly the cook. No; I can't give that up. Has your sister suggested a transfer?"

"Certainly not. You don't think I'd talk to her about this business, do you?"

"I imagine not."

"Not much," continued Billy, shaking his head. "But you've got to find some way out of this, Hedge. I won't stand for it. You've admitted you're getting sweet on my sister."

"I? I don't recall admitting it. I merely adopted a phrase of your own. It wouldn't have been polite for me to disagree with you on the point."

"Seems to me you're getting polite all of a sudden."

The efficiency man smiled enigmatically.

"Well, I've given you notice. You know what I mean," said Billy significantly. "We're only standing for you because you've got control of the money; that's all. You don't want to get the idea that any of us have any use for you, Hedge, or for the way you've been running this house. You're a bug on one subject, but it doesn't belong here. And you understand I've got to look out after my sisters, don't you?"

"It's certainly your duty, Brooke," assented the efficiency man.

"And I'm going to do it!"

"Good!"

Billy arose and stood irresolute for an instant. Then he shrugged his shoulders.

"You understand now?" he asked.

"Quite."

As Billy turned toward the door he found himself face to face with Constance. There was a look of plain inquiry in her eyes, as their glance shifted rapidly from her brother to the efficiency man.

Billy coughed in his embarrassment.

"What's the understanding about?" she asked pleasantly. "Or is it a secret?"

"Oh, not at all," answered H. Hedge.

Billy Brooke glared at him.

"We were talking about work," continued the head of the house.

"Work? *You,* Billy?"

"Well, why not?" he demanded defensively.

"I—oh—no reason at all, of course," said Constance quickly. "Only—"

"I can do all this sort of stuff," added her brother, with a grand wave of his hand in the direction of the filing cases and the desk.

"Oh, can you?" she challenged. "Don't be too sure, Billy."

"Bet you I can!"

Constance shook her head and laughed.

"Not while I hold the job," she said. "You

wouldn't have a poor working girl lose her situation, would you?"

Billy sighed heavily.

The efficiency man bent over one of the lower drawers in the desk, averting his face.

"What sort of work is he going to do, Mr. Hedge?" she asked.

"Oh, we haven't reached that. Just a general talk, Miss Brooke."

"Will he be an efficiency engineer?"

Billy cast a look of scorn at his sister and a final scowl of warning at H. Hedge. Then he stalked out of the library.

Constance was puzzled. She knew they were hiding something from her, and she had a misgiving that Billy had been indiscreet.

"Is my brother really going to work, Mr. Hedge?" she asked, as she seated herself at the opposite side of the desk and picked up a pile of report cards.

The efficiency man was studying the manner in which her hair waved about her ears and the singular steadiness of her serene, gray eyes, so that for a moment he did not answer. Then, remembering, he roused himself.

"He wants to go to work," he answered.

"That's encouraging. To work at what?"

"He offered to be my secretary."

"Really?" This was a subject for thought, and Constance devoted a little time to it. "Am—am I to be discharged, then?"

"Not while you are efficient," he assured her.

"And am I efficient?"

This was disconcerting, even to an efficiency man, particularly one who has just been warned by a big brother.

"Medium," he answered.

Constance frowned. She had expected something better than that, and wondered if the campaign had struck a snag. It is annoying to apply for a reference and obtain only a half-hearted one. As for H. Hedge, he realized that he must be cautious. The business discipline of the Brooke household was a thing to be maintained at all costs.

"I hate being medium," she said, as she began checking up a report card, upon which Giovanni had noted the presence of clinkers in the coal. "I want to be either very good or very bad."

"Why such extremes?"

"Because being only medium is colorless. Am I colorless?"

"Eh? Who said so? No!"

"Well, you inferred it. Then what color am I?"

"Pink," said the efficiency man as he watched her cheeks. "And gray"—that was for her eyes—"with a dash of chestnut." He was looking at her hair. "And some blue." It was her gown now. "And a bit of—"

Constance glared at him.

"I didn't ask for an inventory," she interrupted sharply. "Or a card index. You're always putting down items and adding them up—and I don't want to be added."

H. Hedge came nearer to wearing an expression of despair than at any time since his invasion of the Brooke household.

"Well, what on earth do you want?" he demanded almost irritably.

Constance knew what she wanted, felt angry at herself for wanting it, and still angrier at the efficiency man for not knowing what she wanted. She wanted a compliment. She flushed, too, when she realized that perhaps she had been guilty of fishing for one.

"I don't want anything, if you please," she retorted. "I'm busy with the reports."

He made a gesture of hopelessness and became busy himself.

Constance did not remain in the library long. After ten minutes or so she laid aside the report cards on a pretext and started toward the door. She was almost at the threshold when the efficiency man called after her, in a desperate voice:

"You're the color of twenty-four-carat gold!"

She affected not to hear, and did not turn her head in acknowledgment. H. Hedge sighed and shook himself irritably.

"Well, how in blazes do *I* know what color she wants to be?" he muttered.

Constance straightway sought her brother. She proposed to have an explanation of something that disturbed her mind.

"What were you talking to Mr. Hedge about?" she asked abruptly.

"Work," answered Billy, taking his cue from the efficiency man.

She waved a hand impatiently.

"Were you talking about me?"

Billy hesitated and then supplied an answer.

"Who started it?" she questioned swiftly. "Did he?"

Billy remained silent.

"Of course not; I knew he didn't," Constance affirmed with a nod. "You started it. What was it about?"

"You," answered Billy gruffly, thus completing the circle.

"Well, what about me? What's wrong with me? Why do I have to be discussed? What business—"

"Look here," blurted her brother; "I'll talk to H. Hedge whenever I please. And if I don't want him to hang around you, I'll—"

Billy paused, flustered and annoyed. Constance eyed him for a brief interval, with the color rising in her cheeks.

"So that was it," she said slowly. "And by what right do you go to Mr. Hedge on such a matter? It's humiliating. I forbid you ever to do it again. And he does *not* 'hang around' me, as you say. Mr. Hedge is a gentleman, and—"

"A gentleman!" echoed Billy. "Why, you're defending him!"

"I'm not!" she retorted hotly. "You are unbearable, Billy."

"But I thought—"

"Then stop it! It's bad for you. And hereafter don't you ever dare to say a word to him about me."

She flung herself out of the room, leaving her brother bewildered and staring. Fate had it that Alice should encounter her at the worst possible moment.

"Well, how's the great campaign going, Connie?"

Constance made no answer.

"It seems to be going all right for you," remarked Alice bluntly. "You're rolling in riches. But where do *I* come in?"

"At the finish," said Constance sharply.

"Not before then?"

"Have a little patience, Alice."

"When is the finish?"

"Alice, you're stupid!"

"Maybe. But with you the only one getting the swag—"

"That's vulgar!"

"Why, I'm still from Joplin, Mo.," said Alice imperturbably.

"Alice!"

But the younger sister was unimpressed. She laughed jeeringly.

"Oh, I guess you think E. E. is O. K.," she trilled.

"I—I don't!"

"Huh. But I notice you hesitated."

"I—I didn't!"

"You did."

"Didn't!"

"Did."

Constance seized Alice by the shoulders, ejected her from the sitting-room, and slammed the door.

"They're insufferable—all of them!" she exclaimed to nobody. "And he—he is the worst of all. And yet—"

She sauntered to a mirror.

"He said I was all gold," she mused, studying her image. "Well, I don't know."

CHAPTER XXI

A LITTLE LOVE-MAKING

H. HEDGE, with his maddening habit of discovering things, came upon an extraordinary performance in the dining-room. On one side of the circular table stood Ruth, one of the housemaids, her cheeks flushed, her eyes bright. She was palpably out of breath. On the other side stood Frank, the chauffeur, with a grin of resolution on his face.

It was not so much the fact that neither of them belonged to the dining-room as it was their maneuvering which astonished the efficiency man.

Frank made a quick sally to the left, moving around the table. Ruth, with a suppressed shriek, duplicated the movement. Frank halted and darted in the other direction. So did Ruth. Back and forth they dodged half a dozen times, while H. Hedge stood in the doorway and watched.

"Oh, I'll get you!" cried Frank jubilantly.

"Never! You go 'way!"

"Ha!" laughed Frank, as he made a new dash.

"You stop!"

The chauffeur chuckled and continued the pursuit.

This continued for a full minute, while the efficiency man stood unobserved. He rather marveled at Ruth's

fleetness of foot and at the discomfiture of Frank over her nimbleness. Then Ruth discovered the audience, and promptly yelled in dismay.

"What's the idea?" asked H. Hedge, advancing.

Frank became tongue-tied and fumbled with the strap of one of the leather puttees.

"He—he was chasing me," panted Ruth.

"I got that much," observed the efficiency man. "But why?"

Ruth looked significantly at Frank, whose face was now a dull red.

"He—"

Ruth paused and giggled.

"Well?"

"He—he wanted to kiss me!"

"Is that so, Frank?" demanded H. Hedge.

Frank shrugged his shoulders, then nodded faintly.

"And why did you want to kiss her?"

Foolish question! If he had not been an efficiency engineer, he might have understood. Ruth was prettier than a whole lot of magazine covers.

She looked at Frank expectantly, then tossed her head and frowned as he made no answer.

"Frank, you are discharged!"

The chauffeur was sullen and unmoved. Ruth uttered a little cry, and her hand leaped to her throat.

"Oh, please, Mr. Hedge," she pleaded.

The efficiency man eyed her in surprise.

"What's the matter?" he demanded. "He was annoying you, wasn't he? I take it that you didn't want to be kissed, inasmuch as you were running away.

If you *did* want to be kissed, why didn't you stand still?"

Ruth blushed furiously.

"I do not approve of kissing," continued H. Hedge coldly. "And I do not allow it among employees of this house—in business hours. Frank is discharged for attempting it, and you, Ruth, are retained only because of your manifest endeavors to escape."

There was utter misery in Ruth's face.

"Please, Mr. Hedge, he—he didn't mean anything. Honest!"

"I did," blurted Frank, recovering speech for the first time.

"Well, what did you mean?" demanded the efficiency man.

"I want to marry her."

Ruth gasped and covered her face with her hands. Frank squared his shoulders and glared defiantly at H. Hedge.

"Have you asked her?" inquired the latter abruptly.

"I was trying to."

"Is that the way you ask a young woman to marry you? By chasing her around a table and trying to kiss her?"

Frank shuffled his feet and made no answer.

"Such a performance is absolutely without sense," continued the efficiency man sharply. "It's a waste of time, a waste of energy. It is an attempt to accomplish something by indirection rather than by direction. I do not approve of it. It is unscientific."

Ruth was peering at the efficiency man through her fingers.

"Frank," said H. Hedge, "do you still want to marry this young woman?"

"Uh-huh."

"All right. Ask her."

Frank was dumb again.

"Say, 'Will you marry me?' That's the shortest form."

Still the chauffeur hesitated. Ruth had removed her hands from her face and was regarding him with curious eyes. Unconsciously, perhaps, the pair edged toward each other.

"Go ahead and say it!" commanded H. Hedge sternly.

But still Frank said nothing. One of his hands groped helplessly along the edge of the table. An instant later it met one of Ruth's, groping in the opposite direction. And then—

Ruth was smothered in a clumsy but wholly efficient embrace. She put her blond head against Frank's coat and began to cry. Then Frank began to whisper to her and Ruth whispered back. By and by she lifted her head and slipped her arms around his neck. Then they began to kiss each other.

The efficiency man stood staring, but they paid not the slightest attention to him. He endured a full minute of it, and then cleared his throat.

"Well, what does this mean?" he demanded.

Ruth came out of her dream and twisted her head in the direction of H. Hedge.

"It means we're going to get married," she said defiantly.

The efficiency man shook his head in annoyance.

"It is a most ridiculous performance," he remarked. "You have wasted probably ten minutes over a matter that could easily have been concluded in ten seconds. Frank, do you also interpret this rigamarole as an engagement to marry?"

"Uh-huh," answered Frank, as he kissed Ruth again.

"Very well. I give my consent."

They gazed upon the efficiency man with undisguised astonishment.

"I—I did the consenting!" flared Ruth.

"That will do," said H. Hedge, raising a warning hand. "As the head of this house, I *do* the consenting. Frank, inasmuch as you are going to be married, you will need a job. Therefore I reinstate you."

Ruth beamed at the efficiency man and kissed Frank.

"And now, when do you want to be married—today?"

Frank looked startled and Ruth uttered a cry. Then she hid her face against Frank's coat.

"We—want to be engaged a while," she said in a muffled voice.

"More nonsense," snapped H. Hedge with a look of annoyance. "However, I have no further time to waste with you. I have at least accomplished an engagement. When you want to be married, let me know. And no more kissing during hours, under-

stand. I will prepare a notice for the bulletin in the servants' quarters. Send Horace for it in five minutes."

He wheeled and marched out of the dining-room by the shortest possible route, leaving Frank and Ruth resolutely clinging to each other.

"I am beginning to realize for the first time," said the efficiency man to himself, as he reached his desk, "to what an appalling extent inefficiency and archaic methods have invaded our whole social structure. This affair is at once shocking and illuminating. Getting engaged! Bah! Why in Heaven's name two apparently sane people spend such an amount of time and energy in concluding the simplest form of contract in the whole world is beyond my comprehension. I said it could be handled in ten seconds; in reality five would be amply sufficient. Here is a case for standardization, if ever one was."

He began writing on a sheet of paper.

"I suppose, however," he mused, "that Ruth was entirely justified in endeavoring to escape, not having the least idea of Frank's intentions. It is well that I arrived and pointed the way to a solution."

Presently Horace entered, and the efficiency man handed him a paper, to be duly posted. It said:

Frank and Ruth to marry. Approved.
(Signed) H. Hence.

Horace glanced at the bulletin and coughed deferentially.

"They're wanting to keep it a secret, sir," he ventured.

"A secret?" echoed the efficiency man. "For how long?"

"I couldn't say, sir. But you know how it is with girls, sir. They just sort of like to— Oh, you know, sir."

"It is evident that I am beginning to find out. Of course, it is absurd. A secret! For what good reason? It's nonsense. However, do as you please with the notice."

H. Hedge dismissed the butler with an impatient wave of his hand. Horace bowed his way out and, having reached the hall, carefully folded the paper and tucked it into his pocket. Horace, being of mature years and benevolent disposition, felt an indulgence toward youth. Let them have their secrets if they want to.

But in the kitchen he found it was no secret. Mary, her hands to her hips, was surveying two young people, whose guilt was stamped on happy faces.

"So 'tis done at last, is it?" she observed. "May God give the two av you sinse. Ye've been palaverin' an' meanderin' for this year past, till I'm sick an' sore watchin' the pair av ye. An' now ye're gettin' marri'd. Frank, ye're a fool. Ruth, ye're a bigger wan. Come here, the two av yez, an' kiss an ould woman."

In the library that evening H. Hedge was in a strangely preoccupied mood. Billy was out somewhere,

probably at a poker party. Alice, still oppressed by the ten-o'clock rule, had retired to her room. Constance alone represented the Brooke family. She was sitting with her feet on the fender, a book in her lap, but her eyes staring idly into the dancing flames of the driftwood fire.

The efficiency man rose abruptly from his desk, after drawing several diagrams on a pad, and approached the fireplace.

"A most ridiculous affair happened this afternoon," he said.

Constance looked up.

"It concerned Frank and Ruth."

"Are they engaged?" she asked.

"Why—yes. How did you know?"

"Oh, I've been expecting it," she answered carelessly.

H. Hedge pondered that announcement in evident surprise.

"At any rate," he said, "I fortunately arrived in time to bring the matter to a conclusion. It was one of the worst cases of inefficiency I ever saw."

"Truly?"

Constance looked interested.

"Glaring," he affirmed.

"How?"

H. Hedge told her. She watched the blue and green flames during the recital, and seemed to find something amusing in them. She had to watch something; she did not dare venture a glance at H. Hedge.

"It was very nice of you to consent," she assured him gravely, as he concluded the matter.

"Not at all," he answered brusquely. "I had no objection whatever to the end sought to be attained. I objected only to the method."

He took to pacing for a while, making quick trips back and forth across the library. Presently she became aware that he had stopped behind her chair.

"Connie!"

She looked up suddenly, her ear catching an unfamiliar note in his voice. The salutation was unfamiliar, too; he had never called her "Connie" before.

He coughed as she met his glance, and made another turn of the library.

"Connie."

"I believe I'll file the reports," she said, dropping her book. "I forgot them."

He stopped, stared suspiciously, and resumed his walk.

"I'll file them in the morning," he told her. "As I was saying, Connie—"

"There are two letters to write," she reminded him.

"In the morning," he said irritably. "We never write letters in the evening."

Still he walked, while Constance watched him, biting her lip and trying to keep the mirth out of her eyes.

"Now, Connie—"

"I think, Mr. Hedge, that you should not walk so continuously on one part of the rug. It wears it out."

He frowned heavily, but shifted his course.

"Listen, Connie."

"And you should take longer steps. It will save your shoes."

He glared furiously and stopped in his tracks.

"Do not interrupt," he commanded. "This is an important matter, Connie."

"That's six times you've said 'Connie' in the last minute. A waste of words. I perfectly understand who you're talking to."

She smiled now, somewhat derisively. The efficiency man rocked back and forth on his squarely planted feet and scowled down at her.

"I want you to understand," he said, "I am not to be interrupted. This matter concerns both of us and must be determined without delay. Now, Connie—"

A spark flew out on the rug and he stopped to brush it back on the hearth.

"As a matter of fact, Connie—"

"One moment, please. Why say, 'As a matter of fact'? If it were not a matter of fact, I'm very sure you wouldn't say it. The phrase is nearly always superfluous."

He thought about it for a few seconds.

"You are right; but let it pass. There is another matter to discuss. One of my invariable rules—"

"And regulations."

"Rules!" he snapped.

"Very well—rules."

"—is to go directly to the point."

"Thereby saving time and distance," she remarked.

The efficiency man gazed at her in despair. Suddenly he held out his hands appealingly, in a manner quite foreign to H. Hedge, E. E.

"Connie—will—"

She sprang to her feet with a look of alarm and placed her finger on her lips mysteriously.

"Wait!" she whispered.

Gently she tiptoed across the library, holding up a warning hand for silence. H. Hedge, rooted to his place, watched her with growing amazement. She paused at the doorway and listened. Then she faced him with a wonderful smile.

"We forgot," she said softly.

"Forgot what?"

"Eleven o'clock—lights out."

At the same instant her finger touched the control-button in the wall, and as H. Hedge stood alone in the darkness a tinkling laugh came back to him from the staircase.

Some time later, as he made his way slowly to his room, he muttered, half aloud:

"It is barely possible, of course, that there is some merit in the methods of Frank and Ruth. I must consider the matter."

CHAPTER XXII

BURNED BRIDGES

CONSTANCE, occasionally smiling to herself at a reminiscence, was spending a busy morning in the library. H. Hedge was somewhere else. This gave her unmolested opportunity to examine the bills from the shops, for one thing. Their dimensions gratified her. Yet even the bills did not occupy chief place in her thoughts. That was reserved for the efficiency man.

"He's not nearly so efficient as I thought—poor thing," she murmured as she took up a pile of report cards. "Why, even Tommy Treadwell—"

Now, as Constance busied herself thus, with all the outward appearance of a secretary rather than a schemer, she chanced to notice that the bottom drawer on the right-hand side of the desk was open about two inches. This was unusual, because the efficiency man had a habit of keeping this drawer locked. Just why, she never knew; but she presumed that he stored personal papers there. She had never taken the least interest in the contents of the drawer.

But so long as it was open, she decided to make an examination. Pulling it all the way out, she explored the contents. On top of a pile of papers, she

found a fat, leather-bound book. It took but a glance to identify it as a diary, and the writing on its pages was in the familiar hand of H. Hedge.

Nothing is more wickedly fascinating than to read somebody else's diary, in the original, and to realize that you are probably the first intruder. Constance's conscience tugged gently at her elbow, but she ignored its reminder, although she was conscious of it. Curiosity, one of the world's greatest educators, was directing her now; and besides, the diary might have an important bearing upon the campaign.

She found the entries rather commonplace at first. They dealt with things wholly outside of the Brooke mansion, and prior to the arrival of the efficiency man. The diary was a mixture of closely written script and shorthand. Constance perforce skipped the latter, because she could not read it. Even after the diary reached the day on which he took charge of the household, she did not find it of much interest. Day after day, for several weeks, it was a simple record of events that she knew only too well; colorless, terse, and with many abbreviations.

But then came an entry that caused her to sit straighter in the big chair.

Will write book. Data and results too valuable to be lost to world.

That was news! H. Hedge was going to write a book.

"A novel, I wonder?" murmured Constance. "What a queer novel it would be!"

She continued her exploration with thoroughly awakened interest. For several days there was no further reference to a book, unless hidden in the undecipherable pothooks. And then:

Good title would be, "Putting the Home on a Business Basis;" or, "Knocking the Graft Out of the American Household." Great chance for valuable publication of pioneer work along this line.

Constance was faintly disappointed. The subject sounded dull and unromantic; yet none the less, she had a personal interest in the "pioneer work," as she pursued her investigations further. References to the book became more frequent as the idea laid hold upon the mind of the efficiency man and began to shape itself. She found one, for instance:

Devote at least one chapter to waste and inefficiency in homes of idle rich. Unscientific methods. Non-producing family members. Money thrown away. Describe wicked triviality of life in average home. Illustration—Brooke.

Constance frowned as she gathered from this that her home was to be held up to the world as a horrible example. She wondered if the efficiency man would have the hardihood to mention names, and she intended to speak to her father about it as soon as he returned.

Then another entry, several days later:

Chapter on C. Use her as typical idle rich girl. No occupation. No useful education.

Constance gasped, but read on:

Lack of mental discipline. No fixed purpose in life. Chief amusement, extravagance. Good material here. Say that C is—

At this point the efficiency man dropped into shorthand again, running on for half a page. Constance stared at the hieroglyphics and gritted her teeth. There was no mistaking the identity of "C"—it was herself. And she was going to have an entire chapter!

"Say that C is—" Well, what? The shorthand maddened her. Any man, she abruptly decided, who would cloak his opinions in shorthand was a coward. She could not read a single one of the several hundred characters, yet she knew that every hated symbol directly concerned herself. Ah! There was even confirmation of it at the bottom of the page, for here, in longhand, H. Hedge remarked:

Above points good. Very effective case. Elaborate carefully.

Elaborate, indeed! Constance was becoming as angry as she was curious. She turned a page. Here was more of it:

Advisable to subdivide. Make two chapters on C. First, show C as found, representing undesirable type. Second, show C as reformed, after application of scientific methods. More data for second chapter necessary. See additional notes—p. 122.

Constance skipped page after page of the diary, which contained comments on A and B and the servants. She was hunting wildly for more references to C. Several times she found herself again under the scalpel, but always the efficiency man wandered off into shorthand at the most interesting place. She

turned back to the date on which he decided to allot her two chapters, instead of one, and reread:

See additional notes—p. 122.

What were the additional notes? Evidently they were somewhere outside the diary. She dropped the book and delved into the drawer again. A pile of loose manuscript came out. Notes, beyond a doubt, and of an elaborate character. Rapidly she ran through the first dozen pages, then began skipping five and ten sheets at a time. It appeared that H. Hedge was preparing to deal with the historical features of domestic extravagance in the first part of his book, and she cared not a whit about that. It was what he had said about C that spurred her into a feverish hunt.

Ah—she had it now—page 122.

First chapter on C—"As She Was." Describe physical and mental characteristics, clothes, *et cetera*. Describe manner, idleness, recreations, *et cetera*. Note frequent irritability; lack of self-control. Headstrong; stubborn. Fairly good brain, but untrained and unwilling to receive new ideas. Give examples. Show her as perfect type of useless class.

Constance's cheeks were flaming.

Be careful to explain that no exaggeration is employed. Describe accurately, impartially. Use frequent illustrations—acts, words, general attitude of resentment toward efforts to improve.

"It's unspeakable!" she exclaimed aloud. "I'll have him publicly whipped from the house—by the servants."

And then:

Second chapter on C—"As She Is." Trace gradual influence of reform. Show change in attitude. Show how firm insistence on new methods brought results. Note C's willingness to work. Marked change in manner. Happy influence of scientific methods. Point out how type originally represented by C may be transformed under proper direction. Show that dominant mind, working on scientific lines, can always control weaker mind. Even the C type not hopeless. Show effect of rigid discipline, insistence on authority, mental suggestion, *et cetera*.

Constance flung the manuscript on the table and sprang to her feet. Her hands were clenched and quivering. For an instant she stood irresolute; then stepped swiftly across the room and rang for Horace.

"Find Mr. Hedge and send him here at once!" she commanded.

The butler disappeared hastily, alarmed at the expression in her eyes.

The efficiency man was prompt, and evidently expectant. When he walked briskly into the room he was smiling happily. He knew that, no matter how coy or whimsical the young lady might be, she could not turn off daylight by pressing a button. H. Hedge told himself that the moment was at hand.

He stopped abruptly as he saw her, and there was swift questioning in his look. Constance was pointing with a rigid arm at the manuscript on the desk.

"Did you write that?" she asked grimly.

He followed the direction of her gesture, readily identified the manuscript at a glance, and nodded.

"And you dare even to think that you are going to publish it?"

Constance had abandoned all of the carefully plotted campaign. No more stealth now; it was war in the open.

"I've been thinking of that very thing," he answered coolly, with a swift change to his most efficient manner.

"I forbid you!"

"I think you are attempting to reverse our positions, Miss Brooke."

He decided that it would not be fitting, under the circumstances, to say "Connie."

The type of the idle rich surveyed him with a stabbing glance of scorn.

"My father will deal with you," she said in a tense voice.

"Let's not talk about that. It's futile. And please remember that, to all intents and purposes, for the time being, *I* am your father. And by what authority do you examine my personal papers?"

Constance did not condescend to explain. She eyed him for several seconds from head to foot, and to his credit it must be admitted that he withstood the scrutiny with courage.

Suddenly she burst into laughter; but it was not of the friendly, mirth-provoking kind that invites accompaniment.

"What a fool you are!" she exclaimed.

H. Hedge stiffened visibly, but made no comment.

"And I'm the person who made a fool out of you."

She laughed again harshly.

"Perhaps you'd better explain," he suggested icily.

"I will. That's exactly what I'm going to do—explain."

She pointed again at the manuscript.

"I'm a 'perfect type,' am I?" she said. "And I have a 'fairly good brain.' Thank you so much for that, Mr. Hedge. I'm idle and extravagant—or I *was*. That's the funny part—'was.' I'm to have two whole chapters—one before and the other after taking. What a generous amount of space! I'm going to be a terrible lesson to the American public. I suppose, of course, you intend to use my full name?"

She paused to laugh again. The efficiency man remained impassive.

"I'm going to be made famous in a most wonderful book. I'm going to show the 'gradual influence of reform.' Delightful! And you are the reformer—the 'dominant mind.' Even *I* am not hopeless—it says so in your book. Already I show the effects of 'rigid discipline.' Oh, it's exquisite! Have I really reformed, Mr. Hedge?"

"Until just now you have shown gratifying progress," he answered.

Constance's laughter overcame her again.

"And you believe—that?"

"I—er—had no reason to doubt it."

"You poor, *poor* creature!"

The efficiency man was mystified and beginning to appear uncomfortable. Was it possible he had made a miscalculation? The only thing that was very clear in his mind was an impression of a spirited and attractively angry young woman.

"Let me tell you something, Mr. Hedge, and then you will see what a fool you have been. You didn't know I was fighting you all the time, did you? You thought because I was willing to come in here and work that I had surrendered. Oh, it's rich! Just because I'd given up making an open fight, you thought it was all over. Oh, you were so much easier than I thought!"

She regarded him with a pitying smile.

"Why, I was just playing with you—for what I could get out of you!" she exclaimed. "And I got it, too. All sorts of things—hats, and shoes, and gowns, and everything that you'd been saying I couldn't have. And I've made you break your rules a dozen times, until it has become positively monotonous."

A dull red crept into the cheeks of H. Hedge, but Constance was remorseless. The two chapters on the perfect type had proved to be the final turning point. She was burning her bridges now.

"Just playing with you," she repeated. "And your whole wonderful system went to smash under it. And you thought you were reforming me! It was so easy to lead you, too. You never even suspected. You were so sure that you wrote it all down, so it could be put in a book. A book! I think I'll write one myself. How would you like to be the hero of my book, Mr. Efficiency Man?"

Hedge made no answer.

"I'll tell how I 'reformed' H. Hedge—how I reformed him right out of his economy and efficiency.

And I'll put all the bills from the shops into an appendix to prove it. It will be a very funny book, I think. Don't you?"

Still he remained silent.

"I think I'll tell about last night, too," she added. "That was the funniest of all."

The efficiency man's teeth clicked.

"It is evident that I made a mistake," he said, staring steadily at her.

"You did—a big one," she declared slowly, throwing aside the raillery in her tone. "Let me tell you, Mr. Hedge, that you haven't reformed anything—particularly me. I'm just as I was at the beginning—just as 'inefficient,' just as 'wasteful,' just as wicked. And I don't intend to be reformed!

"I want you to know that everything I did was just to deceive you. I hate you as much as I ever did—you and all your hateful methods. You made us all hate you, whether we wanted to or not. My father never dreamed of the things you were going to do. Wait till he's back—you'll find out whether you've reformed anything. Efficiency! Economy! Just wait till your corporation finds out what a wonderful success you've been."

Constance paused, breathless. The stoical attitude of H. Hedge was beginning to disconcert her. She would have felt more certain of herself if he had fought back.

"Well, why don't you say something?" she demanded.

"I'm waiting for you to get through, Miss Brooke."

She made a sudden dash to the table and seized the manuscript notes in her hands, waving them aloft with a hysterical gesture.

"See!" she cried. "Here's for your book!"

She tore the pages across and tossed them into the open fire. An instant later the diary followed them. The efficiency man did not make an effort to stay her hands.

For a full half-minute she faced him, her bosom heaving, her eyes alight with excitement.

"There! That's the end of that!" she exclaimed. "You'll never put me in a book! I—I—"

Her voice broke abruptly, and she was shaken by a tempest of weeping.

H. Hedge surveyed her quietly and with no trace of emotion.

"Take a seat," he said sharply. "As soon as you get through with that sob stuff, I'm going to do the talking. And it's going to be *some* talk!"

CHAPTER XXIII

SCIENCE VERSUS —?

CONSTANCE had seated herself, not because of any command from the efficiency man, but in response to a sudden collapse of belligerency. She was terrified at what she had done. She had tossed another person's treasures into the fire without so much as asking leave or serving notice; and the reaction was abrupt. The calmness of H. Hedge frightened her.

Leaning limply forward in the desk chair, she buried her face in her arms and continued to sob.

The efficiency man watched her for a moment, alternately frowning and smiling. He had promised her a talk, but he was uncertain about the beginning of it, even though he had a clear notion of the ending.

"Miss Brooke!" he snapped.

She did not look up.

"Are you listening, Miss Brooke?"

There was a faint nod, although she did not raise her head from the desk.

"You'd better listen," he said grimly. "Because everything is going to eternal smash in the next ten minutes. This is Judgment Day, and we are going to get what is coming to both of us—pronto!"

Still she did not stir. But she was listening in spite of her sobs.

"*Pronto* means all-of-a-sudden," he added.

There was a brief pause in which he devoted more study to the coil of brown hair.

"All bets are off, Miss Brooke. Do you hear that? Bets off—Miss Brooke!"

She heard, but made no acknowledgment of the mystifying intelligence.

"You have known me as H. Hedge, E. E.," he continued. "But hereafter there is no such person. He has disappeared. So has Henry Hedge, who was his immediate predecessor. Henry Hedge is abolished. You are now looking upon H. Wellington Hedge, without any E. E. or other honorary degree tied to the rear axle. I see you are not looking. It makes no difference; you are listening, which is sufficient for the immediate present."

Constance's sobs were becoming less frequent. Her ears caught every word and her curiosity was rising rapidly.

"H. Wellington Hedge," he repeated incisively. "I have killed the 'Henry' and substituted an 'H.' You will presently understand why. I have here in my card case certain cards reading, 'H. Hedge, E. E.' There—they are in the fire. What have you to say to that—Miss Brooke?"

She had nothing to say.

"I am through with efficiency," said the efficiency man.

Constance stirred.

"I am through with economy!"

She moved her head so that one eye peeped out through the crook of her elbow.

"Death to scientific management!" he cried.

Constance raised her head slowly and stared at him. She met a glare that alarmed her. He was standing just opposite, across the library desk, his eyes blazing with a new light.

"You have burned my diary," he said grimly. "You have burned my notes. You have thrown into the fire all my hopes of reforming the American household. Yes— *You!* Now you can take the consequences —you type of the idle rich!"

Constance felt herself shrinking. She had never seen H. Hedge in such mood.

"Idle rich!" he echoed. "Idle rich! All right— I'm for 'em. I'm going to join the crowd."

He laughed boisterously. "You think I'm crazy, don't you?" he said. "I can see it in your eyes. Perhaps I am. Let it go at that; I should worry. Now I'll show you just how crazy I am."

H. Hedge made a dash at the filing case, pausing midway to execute several bewildering steps.

"Observe that I do not take the shortest route," he exclaimed. "Ha! You *did* observe. Now watch!"

He laid hold of the uppermost drawer, yanked it completely out of the cabinet and shook it, as a terrier worries its prey. A second dash brought him opposite the big fireplace, where the last sheets of his book on household graft were still smoldering. He dumped

the contents of the drawer into the flames, seized a big brass poker and began stirring them frantically.

"There she goes!" he shouted as the big manila envelopes caught at the edges. "Everything from A to F—or G. Hanged if I remember which. Don't care either. All the economy and efficiency from A to G, or maybe H. What's the difference? See it burn! Reports, records, bills, receipts—the whole works! Nice draft in that chimney to-day, isn't there? Look at 'em go! You're in it, too; all the C's are included. Whee-e-e!"

He danced madly on the rug, making incantations.

Constance was sitting rigid, with growing apprehension in her eyes. Perhaps he was crazy! Why, he *was!*

When the manila envelopes and their contents were a roaring mass of flames he wheeled quickly and made a second assault upon the filing case.

"G to L!" he exclaimed. "The other one did end at F, after all. Too bad; I thought I'd get more at one lick. Never mind. Here goes nearly half the alphabet. Well, why don't you cheer?"

He dumped the plethoric contents of the second drawer into the fire, then danced again as the flames lapped hungrily.

"G to L! That includes Giovanni, and George, and Household, and Inventory, and—H. Hedge! Yes, and anything that began with a J or a K—like junk or kittens. And L—like lemons. Wow!"

Constance was fascinated with horror. But H.

Hedge did not notice that. He made another attack on the cabinet.

"M to S," he announced, as he dragged forth a third drawer. "Here goes Mary, the cook! And Matilda —and Minnie—and Ruth. Horace is burned already. Fanny went with the first instalment. M to S! Meats and noodles and oranges and pineapples and quinces and radishes and—and steam heat. Watch 'em burn! Eh, Miss Brooke—what do you think about it?"

There was a wild expression in his eyes as he turned from the conflagration to glare at her. Constance huddled in her chair.

"And now from T to Z!"

The remaining drawer shot from the cabinet and went bodily into the fire, contents and all.

"There goes Tommy Treadwell," he chortled. "And Witherbee, and Maudie Van Nest, and everything from T to the finish."

He stirred things with the poker again, jabbing viciously at wads of paper that were reluctant to give up the ghost.

"Economy!" snorted the efficiency man. "Piffle! Efficiency! Ashes to ashes! All sizzling damnation —where they belong. Excuse the emphasis; I'm a bit enthusiastic. Watch 'em burn, Miss Brooke."

He began yanking the drawers out of the mahogany desk, flinging their contents on the floor and kicking them across the hearth, in among the logs and embers. Constance chanced to be in the way, and he seized the chair in which she was sitting and slid it a dozen feet along the floor.

"Sit there and watch the finish," he commanded gleefully. "Blank forms, letterheads, envelopes—all the works."

He found more papers lying on the desk and flung them into the mounting flames, whistling merrily. Constance was dumb and inert. She was truly frightened. No efficiency man in his senses could thus behave, she knew; and she could not yet believe that H. Hedge had renounced efficiency. Something had snapped in his brain; she was sure of that.

Suddenly he snatched the poker again and advanced upon her.

"See that?" he demanded, waving it. "A very useful poker—large, heavy, strong. Sit where you are; don't dare to move. I'll be back in half a minute."

He rushed from the library, and she heard him running down the hall. She sat there, powerless, even though her instinct was to fly from the house and escape the madman. A pity he was mad, she found herself thinking—a pity, because in his madness H. Hedge seemed almost sublime. Certainly he was superhuman. There was something fine and spirited in his frenzy, something so utterly different from the efficiency man that Constance, even in her awe, was compelled to admire.

From another part of the house she heard an echo of heavy blows. Heavens! H. Hedge was killing somebody!

Then a sound of rapid footsteps, and he was again in the library, a wild light of triumph in his eyes. He flung the poker into a corner and laughed joyously.

"It's done!" he announced. "That's a bully poker."

Constance questioned him with terrified eyes.

"Yes, it's done! The time clock is dead—all the wheels and insides spilled out on the floor."

The girl in the chair breathed again. There had been no murder in the Brooke mansion.

"Nobody'll ever punch that clock again, after the wallop I gave it," he cried happily. "Busted the dial at the first crack. Looks as if it had been shot up with a 42-centimeter gun. Mary is reviving Elvira—she fainted."

He paused for an instant, then rushed forward, seized Constance by the wrist, dragged her from the chair and whirled her across the room.

"Sit down," he ordered, pointing to the little office chair that stood at the typewriter desk.

She obeyed, trembling.

"Stick in a sheet of paper."

Mechanically she followed his instructions.

"Now take this:

"Economy & Efficiency Corporation, Ltd.,
"New York City, New York.

"Got that?" he demanded. "Good. Now, go ahead:

"GENTLEMEN:
"I resign.

"Got that? Right! Now:

"Don't send anybody in my place. If you do I'll bust him over the head.

"Yours truly.

"That's all. Let's see. Here—I said 'bust,' not 'burst.' Change it. There—that's correct. Now address an envelope. Thanks. And now put in another sheet."

Constance did as bidden, in terror of the madman.

"Take this:

"Henry Wellington Hedge,
"DEAR SIR:

"No; wait a minute. Scratch out the 'Dear Sir.' That's it. Now:

"DEAR HENRY:

"Did you hear me say 'Dear Henry?' Write it, then. Young woman, who's dictating this letter? All right then.

"DEAR HENRY:
"I resign my job as secretary, to take effect as soon as I can write my name under
"Yours affectionately—"

Constance's cheeks flamed and her fingers became paralyzed after the "Yours."

"Go on! Write 'affectionately,'" he ordered menacingly. "You take orders until you sign that. You're still my secretary. Write!"

"I'm not your secretary!" she declared passionately, at last finding her voice. "You've—you've resigned yourself!"

"Not until I sign it," he cried. "Write 'affectionately'!"

With trembling fingers she wrote—

—affectionately.

"Good!" exclaimed H. Hedge as he dragged her back to the big desk. "Now sign."

He dipped a pen and thrust it into her hand.

"Sign!"

She signed.

He snatched the pen from her fingers and signed the other letter, in a bold, scrawling hand.

"There! That ends the business—the efficiency part. You resign; I resign. It's all off. Now we're ready to take up the other matter. Here—where are you going? Not much; sit right where you are—Connie. Don't forget that you're mine 'affectionately.' "

Constance sank back and stared at him. As she did so, the wild look faded from his eyes, and he smiled at her.

"Now, Connie," he said, seating himself on the desk and looking down at her, "I'm sorry if I scared you, but it had to be done. I'm not crazy; I've just become sane. I've chopped six years of efficiency out of my life and I'm beginning all over again."

She was simultaneously relieved and alarmed.

"Last night," said H. Hedge, "you turned the lights out on me. I don't blame you. I was still an efficiency engineer. I'm just plain Henry now, and as such I'm entitled to a hearing. I love you."

Constance watched him curiously. He was utterly unlike the efficiency man. Somehow, his dark eyes

had changed. They were ardent. They carried an appeal that even his voice lacked.

"Yes, Connie, I love you. Of course I had to. Everybody has to. I suppose that's one of the things I'll have to put up with after we're married."

She gasped and turned pink.

"Certainly; after we're married. We're going to be, you know. No; you mustn't run, dear. You must listen a minute or two. I love you. That's three times I've said it; it proves I've cast economy to the winds. Doesn't it? I'll never economize again, especially on that. I love you—I love you."

And Constance, for all her bewilderment, could see that H. Hedge meant it.

"I think I must have loved you at the start, in a scientific sort of way," he went on. "That's not much of a way to love, but it was the best I knew how—then. There's nothing scientific about it now; there's no rule or formula or stopwatch. It's just honest-to-goodness love—the only kind worth while."

She turned her gaze from his and tried to gather her wits.

"Efficiency is not much of a business," he added lightly. "I'm tired of it. I've been fooling myself about it for a long time. Oh, yes; I was fooled, all right. But I didn't wake up until I found that it was interfering with getting you."

Constance flushed anew. She felt that she ought to be angry, but she was not. Getting her, indeed! Presently she would show him how mistaken he was.

"So, as soon as I realized that efficiency stood be-

tween us, why I cut out efficiency. What else could I do? I loved you, didn't I. *Don't* I love you, Connie?"

The question, she thought, was not only embarrassing, but ridiculous. Why should he ask *her?* If he thought that he did, why seek confirmation?

"Don't I, Connie?"

"I—I— How do I know?"

"Because I never told you a lie, of course."

"Oh!"

"So there's no possible doubt—I love you."

Constance ventured a glance at him and he smiled back. She felt that the conversation was getting out of her control.

"You see," he went on, "it explains lots of things. It explains why I ordered one young man after another out of the house. I was afraid one of them would really get you. I don't suppose I was giving them a sporting chance. But how *could* I? I just had to have you, Connie. You don't mind my saying 'Connie,' do you?"

She made no reply, being a trifle uncertain.

"Now, as to the other part of it," he said. "I mean the part about you fooling me and making me believe that you really liked all that efficiency stuff. You did fool me, of course. But before you got through you fooled yourself, Connie."

Constance was watching him sharply.

"Didn't you fool yourself?"

"How?" she asked unwarily.

"By pretending that I was your enemy and that

you hated me, and then winding up by loving me."

"I—why—"

Her face flamed again.

"How *dare* you say I love you?"

"Because I'm sure of it," he answered happily.

"You—you presume, Mr. Hedge!"

"I do not presume—and my name is Henry. Sometimes I used to be called Harry," he added a little wistfully. "Honestly, Connie, I think you love me."

"You *think* it? You said before—"

He made a gesture of despair and laughed.

"That just shows you how mixed a man gets when he's in love. But I *am* sure of it. And you'll be if you'll only stop to consider."

Constance Brooke had received proposals before, but never one that carried with it such brazen assurance. She knew that she ought to put H. Hedge aright without delay—but she waited.

"I can't give any reason for believing so, I admit," he continued rather lamely. "But I just feel it in my bones. I just feel—oh, I guess it's a hunch, Connie."

He slid down from the table and stood in front of her, his hands outstretched, as he had the evening before. But this time she did not laugh at him. She felt serious and disquieted. It was like having an utter stranger lay his heart in her hands—for there was no doubt that the efficiency man had vanished. As for the stranger, why—

"If you don't love me, I think you ought to deny it," he suggested meekly.

Constance was confused. This stranger had no

right to make such a demand. Such things weren't done—that was all. It was not fair to put it that way.

"Please excuse me," she said. "I—I think I'll go upstairs, Mr. Hedge."

" 'Henry.' "

"Mr. Hedge."

" 'Harry.' "

"I thought you'd stopped giving orders. I resigned, you know."

"I didn't mean it for an order," he said apologetically. "But I wish you'd stop calling me 'Mr. Hedge.' It's got to be done, sooner or later."

She sank back in her chair and shook her head helplessly. It did not appear that H. Hedge had cast aside any of his persistency.

"And I'm waiting for you to deny it," he added. "Only don't—please!"

"I deny—"

"Stop!"

She stopped, and was annoyed when she became aware of it.

"I deny—"

He reached over and placed his hand across her lips.

"Don't, dear," he pleaded.

She pushed the hand away, but did not finish the sentence. Instead, she rose from the chair and started toward the hallway. Then she changed her course, for no conscious reason, and went over to one of the

windows, where she stood with her back toward him. H. Hedge followed.

"I guess I've bungled it pretty badly," she heard him saying. "I'm no good at it. If I only knew how, I'd make you the most wonderful proposal in the world. You're entitled to it. But it seems I don't know how."

"Yet you told me—"

She paused and bit her lip.

"Told you what?"

"Never mind."

"Tell me!"

"Why, once you told me that you'd been engaged twice."

"Did I? I'd forgotten it."

"If you forget things like that so easily, I—"

She stopped again, not knowing exactly what she wanted to say. She had not turned her head, but knew he was standing behind her, very close. She wanted to see his face, but dared not look; she wanted to know the precise expression in his eyes.

"Well, I have forgotten just how I proposed to them," he said truthfully. "I know I never meant it, anyhow."

"You say things like that—and don't mean them?"

"There I go again," he declared in a tone of despair. "Oh, *please* help me out, Connie! Honest Injun, I don't seem to be able to talk straight. I can keep on saying I love you, over and over again; but I can't get beyond that, somehow or other. I suppose it sounds monotonous."

"Monotonous!"

The floundering uncertainty went out of his eyes and he beamed at the back of her head. He took her gently by the shoulders and turned her around.

"Let's quit fooling," he said.

"So—so you've been fooling, then," she murmured. "Then I—"

The rest of the sentence was smothered as H. Hedge stood there with Constance in his arms, his heart pounding a hundred beats to the minute. He did not dare speak. Constance did not try; it was too—amazing.

After several minutes, he ventured a pleading appeal.

"I don't know whether I can talk straight yet," he said. "I suppose I'm due for another bungle. But I've kissed the top of your head so often that I just wondered if you'd let me—"

She lifted her head—and let him.

"I don't deserve this," he said humbly after an interval.

"I don't think I do, either—after the way you treated me," she answered faintly. "I—I think I must be crazy."

"Why?"

"For loving you."

"Connie!" He held her off at arm's length. "Honestly—do you?"

She looked at him in amazement.

"H. Hedge, you are insufferable!" she exclaimed.

"Do you think I'd let you—kiss me—and almost crush me to death—if I didn't love you?"

He seized her again, and they began once more, from the point where they had quit fooling.

It was Constance who broke the silence finally.

"It seems to me," she said, as she ran her fingers lightly, almost curiously, over his hair, "that for a person who has abandoned efficiency, you are still a rather scientific manager. O-o-oh! There—didn't I tell you so, dear?"

CHAPTER XXIV

"E. E." FOR THE LAST TIME

HALF an hour later Constance and H. Hedge were gravely wondering how they could ever explain it to anybody. They could not even explain it to themselves.

"There's absolutely no sense in it," she said.

"Absolutely none," he agreed.

"It's impossible to give any good reason."

"Impossible."

"And yet—well, it's done."

"That's the only explainable part of it—it's done. Nobody knows how; not even us."

"Yet we've got to tell them, of course."

"You bet we have! I'm going to tell everybody, before you change your mind."

"No fear, E. E.," she said, gravely.

"I told you E. E. was dead—extinct."

"Nevertheless, I'm afraid I'll always call you that—or H. Hedge. I'm so used to it. Do you suppose father will consent?"

"What's *he* got to say about it?" demanded the ex-efficiency man. "I consent, and that's enough. I'm your guardian, you know. I give my official sanction."

"But you're too late, my dear. You resigned. And this—this happened afterward."

"Then I reinstate myself long enough to express my approval."

"No you don't!" warned Constance. "E. E., if you reinstate yourself for as much as a solitary second I'll break the engagement. I don't want to know any more efficiency men. Heavens! Wasn't one bad enough?"

"I guess I was awful," he admitted.

"Well, part of the time," she said judicially. "You see, if I admit you were awful all the time I never can forgive myself for what I've done. I must have some justification, E. E."

They were sitting side by side on the big desk, swinging their feet and watching the glowing ashes of efficiency, with H. Hedge's arm clasping her shoulders, when an amazed exclamation startled them.

"What—in—blazes!" said a voice.

As they turned abruptly, Billy Brooke strode into the room.

"Hello, Bill," said Hedge easily. "When did you float in?"

"Wha—what's this?"

Constance smiled at her brother and linked an arm around one of H. Hedge's.

"*Connie!*" cried Billy.

"Why, what's wrong, Billy?" asked the retired efficiency engineer. "Didn't you ever see anything like this?"

And he kissed Constance.

"Leave my sister alone!" growled Billy menacingly, and this time he plainly meant it.

"I don't want him to," said Constance. "And don't you lay a finger on him, Billy boy, because he will break you into little pieces. He can—can't you, E. E.?"

Her eyes kindled with pride at memories of the prowess of H. Hedge.

Billy Brooke was stunned. He gaped at the pair and shook his head slowly, in complete bewilderment.

"Connie's going to marry me," announced H. Hedge, grinning. "You're almost my brother-in-law, Bill."

"Is this true, Connie?"

Constance nodded and laughed.

"You mean to tell me you're going to marry that —that—that crazy nut?"

"But he's not crazy, Billy dear. Are you, E. E.? He isn't an efficiency man any more. He resigned. And the efficiency is all in the fire, and the time-clock is smashed, and all the rules are abolished. So you mustn't call him a nut, because—well, because he's mine."

"We're disgraced!" moaned Billy.

"See here, William Brooke," said his sister sternly. "Never let me hear you say that again. We're *not* disgraced! He's the finest, dearest—"

"Let up—please," begged H. Hedge modestly.

"I won't!" declared Constance. "You're whatever I say you are. As for you, Billy, I want you to shake hands with him and congratulate him."

Billy glared.

"Billy, do as I say!" she commanded. "Why, it's an insult not to. Don't you think enough of your sister to congratulate the man who gets her?"

"But, Connie—after everything's that happened—after all he's done?"

Constance set her lips firmly and slid down from the table.

"E. E.," she said. "You promised to do anything I ever asked, didn't you?"

"I did."

"Very well. Then beat him up!"

And Constance pointed at her brother.

H. Hedge laughed and advanced toward Billy, with an extended hand.

"Shake, Bill," he said. "I'm O. K., even if you don't believe it yet. Connie says I am, and she's always right. I'm going to prove it to all of you—to-day."

Billy Brooke found himself studying a singularly winning smile, quite different from any he had ever before observed on the face of H. Hedge. Hesitatingly he thrust out his hand.

"And now kiss me and wish me happiness," ordered Constance.

Billy did, still bewildered.

"Does—does Alice know this?" he asked anxiously.

"She's not home from school yet."

"It'll be an awful shock to her."

"It is to all of us," said Constance cheerfully. "That's one of the nice parts of it. I love to be

shocked. But you're going to be shocked worse than Alice. Tell him what you are going to do, E. E."

For answer, H. Hedge fumbled among the few remaining papers on the desk and discovered the checkbook.

"When did I cut off your allowance, Bill?" he asked.

"I—gosh!"

"It's three weeks, anyhow," observed H. Hedge, as he began to write. "Call it a month; that's near enough. We'll say two hundred is coming to you. And then there's interest, at six per cent. I guess. Oh, let's make it an even two-fifty and call it square. I don't want to bother figuring it. Is that satisfactory, Bill?"

Billy Brooke was choking. As Hedge signed his name with a particularly dashing flourish, he stood as though hypnotized. And when the check was in his hands he was still dumb. He stared at the slip of paper and then at the signer of it. Constance and Hedge laughed merrily.

"Oh—I say," faltered Billy after a long pause. "This sort of gets me, E. E. It isn't the money part, but—oh, I guess you're all right."

The two Brookes and H. Hedge were laughing uproariously over a reminiscence of economy and efficiency, when the third Brooke made her appearance. Alice paused and surveyed the group from the threshold. Then, tossing her books into a chair, she advanced upon the trio.

"Hello, Billy," she said, and kissed him.

"Hello, Connie—you fraud," and kissed her.

"And hello, H. Hedge—congratulations."

And she kissed *him!*

"Alice!"

It was the amazed voice of Constance that spoke.

"Pooh!" said Alice blandly. "I knew it was going to happen all the time. Anybody who wasn't blind could see it."

"Alice! You couldn't have seen it—nobody could!"

"Couldn't I, though? I've been expecting to see you fall on each other's necks at breakfast for the past two weeks."

"But you never said a word! And you kept talking about him just like the rest of us," protested Constance.

"I didn't want to spoil it," said Alice wisely.

"And you freely forgive me everything?" asked H. Hedge in wonderment.

"To tell you the truth," said Alice with fine simplicity and frankness, "I was never very mad at you after the morning you read the declaration. You gave yourself away then, H. Hedge. But, just for the sake of revenge—"

She seized his thick hair in both hands, took a firm grip, and shook his head until he howled.

"There! We're quits," she exclaimed. "Now, go on with your spooning."

And she raced from the room.

"Do you really think she knew?" asked Constance in an awed voice.

"You never can tell," observed Billy thoughtfully. "She's a wise little guy, but she doesn't always let on."

"She's a strong little guy," affirmed H. Hedge ruefully, rubbing his head. "You'll have to protect me from that child, Connie."

"She's a dear," said Constance. "And I'm beginning to think she knew more about it than any of us, after all."

Horace entered the room, carrying a trayful of mail. When he had located the exact spot where H. Hedge sat, he faced it, drew himself up with a military air, and covered the interval by the shortest possible route and with the fewest number of steps. With a single movement of the arm, he presented the mail.

H. Hedge took it from the tray, biting his lip to conceal a smile. Horace wheeled about, clicked his heels together, and started back over the same route. He was halted by the voice of the ex-efficiency man before he had reached the door.

"Take a couple of turns around the table, Horace," commanded H. Hedge.

Horace stared.

"Go ahead—just for luck."

Very solemnly, Horace walked twice around the table.

"After this, walk any old way you please, Horace. If I catch you doing this shortest-distance-between-two-points stuff any more, you and I will roll around the floor some. And tell 'em all downstairs to get busy and wear out their shoes. If I don't see some

varnish kicked off the floors, there'll be a row. And, while I think of it, have Giovanni sweep up the time-clock and throw it into the ash-barrel."

"Very good, sir," said Horace impassively.

But when he reached the hall he leaned against the staircase while he recovered his breath.

"And now to get ready for the big riot," said H. Hedge.

Constance and Billy looked at him expectantly.

"A party—the real thing—and no hospital corps!" he exclaimed.

"When?"

"To-night."

"For just us?" asked Constance.

"Just *us?* I should say not! Just everybody—that's all."

"It can't be done, E. E. There isn't time."

"All the time in the world," he affirmed.

"But, there are so many who will have engagements, and—"

"Let 'em break their engagements. Tell 'em there's a big surprise coming. Make it mysterious; that'll fetch 'em."

"But, E. E., don't you see that nothing is ready? The servants won't have time to prepare things, and—"

"Who? *Our* servants? Child alive, our servants are not going to work at our party! They're going to have a party of their own. This is a public holiday in the Brooke mansion."

Constance looked at H. Hedge suspiciously.

"Are you getting efficient again?" she demanded.

"I keep forgetting," he laughed. "But say, Connie dear, if you'll just let me be efficient for a few hours, I'll knock off after that for the rest of my life. Just give me this one chance. It's the last offense."

"I'm for letting him go to it," advised Billy, as he fondly figured the check in his vest-pocket.

"Go to it, E. E.," assented Constance.

Hedge bounded out of his chair.

"We've all got to pile in and work," he said in his old brisk manner. "Connie, will you do the inviting? You've got your own 'phone upstairs. I'll need the one here. Who will you invite? Everybody you can think of—anybody—you want. Make 'em come. Tell 'em we're sending automobiles after 'em."

"But our car can't carry everybody."

"*Our* car? Our car isn't going to work. I'm going to have a whole fleet of cars, with nothing to do but run around and scoop up guests. I'll have 'em hired in ten minutes."

"They'll soak you a funny price for that," remarked Billy.

"Who said anything about price? What's price got to do with it? I'll hire every taxi from the Battery to Harlem, if we need 'em. Get busy with the invitations. Connie—dearest."

"I'm all in a whirl," she confessed. "I don't know who to invite and who to leave out."

"Don't leave anybody out. Get a mob. Just to give you an idea of what I mean, invite Tommy Tread-

well. Yes, and invite the Van Nest atrocity and that Witherbee thing, if you like. Take 'em all in, from top to bottom, and from bottom to top. Telegraph Washington and invite the President."

"E. E., you're absurd."

"I'm worse than that—I'm ridiculous. But I'm going to be good and loony for one night if I go into a straitjacket in the morning. Now, hurry, Connie, my dear. Wait—kiss me! Now beat it!"

Constance fled to her room and seized the telephone.

"Now, Bill," said H. Hedge, "you never worked for me before, and this is your last chance. Dump a barrel or so of gas into that foolish jitney of yours and stand by for orders. You may have to go a hundred miles a minute, so here's money to pay your fines."

He jammed a roll of yellow bills into the hands of Billy, whirled him about, and propelled him from the room.

Then he seized the desk 'phone.

For the next fifteen minutes H. Hedge was a conversational volcano. He spouted vehement words until the transmitter fairly quivered.

"How many? Oh, be ready for two or three hundred anyhow. Waiters, everything! How much do I want to spend? Don't be silly. I want the whole works, and it's up to you to see I get 'em. Make believe it's for royalty; there'll be a queen here anyhow. Wine? Of course, anything, everything! What do you think I'm running—a hash house? You want

a deposit? Right. I'll have it there in half an hour. Now hop off the wire. I've got to talk to somebody else."

He never paused to take breath.

"You say you've decorated this house before? You're wrong, old man; you only think you did. You mean you trimmed it. I want it *decorated.* You got six hundred dollars for the last job? Well, you're going to get fifteen hundred for this, and if everything isn't all set by nine o'clock I'll come down there and throw bombs through your greenhouses. Yes; you'll get a deposit, too. Now, hustle out the begonias and the potted palms and the floral bowers. Do I want roses? I said I wanted this place *decorated,* didn't I. I want everything from roses to rubber plants. Get it into your head that this is a desert and that you're Luther Burbank. Ring off, Luther."

H. Hedge was assuredly tireless.

"Send somebody to the phone who can talk United States. I want the boss; I don't want the guy that saws the big fiddle. Hello—ah, good. I want a couple of orchestras. Yes—two! Can you get the Metropolitan Opera bunch? No? Why, I could do that myself if I had time. Get a Russian orchestra and a German orchestra— *What?* That's right; I forgot. Get neutrals then, or Allies—I don't care a whoop.

"Have 'em on the job at nine o'clock. What'll they play? All the latest dance dirges, friend. For how long? How do *I* know? I may have 'em here playing for breakfast. They're here until I blow the whistle.

"Would I like a lady harpist? Sure I would. Tell her to trot right along. I leave it all to you. If you say hand-organs, it's hand-organs. But the Lord help you if you throw me down. Selah! Yes—that means by-by."

From telephoning H. Hedge turned to the writing of checks. He was still at it when Billy Brooke returned to announce that his car had been vitalized again.

"Take these checks to these addresses, Bill," commanded the ex-efficiency man. "They're deposits. Let's see; it's two o'clock. Take 'em to the bank first and get 'em certified. Don't mind, do you, old man?"

Billy grinned.

"Let's shake again," he said.

They shook.

"And say, E. E.—you're going to be awful good to Connie, aren't you?"

H. Hedge gripped Billy's fingers until their owner winced.

"Bill," he said, "I'm going to be awful good—but not good enough. Nobody could be good enough to Connie. I'm only a poor human boob, after all."

"You'll do," said Billy. "And E. E.—some time I want you to teach me that straight left—the one you handed Tommy Treadwell."

"I'll demonstrate it right now if you don't rustle with those checks, son! Burn the road, Bill. It's Connie's party."

The retired efficiency engineer was sitting back in

a swivel chair, with his feet on the desk, smoking placidly, when Constance appeared.

"I've come down for a breathing spell," she said. "There's a crowd promised already; Alice is working the phone now. And Alice wants to know if she's to come and if she can stay up after ten o'clock."

H. Hedge promptly stood up and kissed his fiancée.

"Any little sister of Connie Brooke," he said, "can come to any party in this house and stay up to any unholy hour that suits her best. And whoever says she can't will have serious trouble with me. And, by the way, Connie—Bill's a good old scout."

"E. E., it's good to hear you say that. Billy is. But somehow he never seems to take hold of anything. I often wish—"

"Leave Bill to me, dear. I know how to put him on his job."

"But—but—" Constance paused, perplexed. "Why, E. E., you haven't any job yourself! You resigned!"

He laughed.

"That's right; I forgot. Never mind, though. I'll have a job. I'll think of one in a few minutes."

Constance nodded her head in confirmation. She was certain that he would. Suddenly she remembered something.

"What gown do you want me to wear, E. E.? I've been looking them over and I can't decide."

"Gown! Holy smoke! I forgot your gown! Why, you can't wear any of those gowns, Connie. Not on your life! Wait."

He rushed to the telephone and called a number.

"Put the head gown-builder on here," he commanded. "Ah—how do you do, *madame?* This is the residence of John W. Brooke. Miss Brooke—Yes; of course you know her. Well, Miss Brooke—Yes, yes. As I was about to say, Miss Brooke—oh, yes, *yes!* Now, Miss Brooke—one moment, please. This is my conversation, *madame,* not yours. It's the most important conversation in New York City at this particular minute, and I will *not* be interrupted.

"Miss Brooke desires a gown to wear this evening. Therefore, you will have every gown in your shop sent up here inside of an hour, in order that she may make a selection. And send a couple of tailors along to make any necessary changes.

"What? Maybe they're not tailors; but anyhow you send 'em. Have 'em bring their own scissors and pins and all the customary tools. This is a rush job, but it has to be done right.

"How's that? Oh, bunk! You call as many automobiles as you need and put 'em on the bill. *Get those gowns here;* that's all. What? Oh! Consider all apologies made—in French. Sure. *Merci, madame.* You are charming—*magnifique!* All to the good! How's that? All right? Surest thing you know; we be great friends in no time. Only get those gowns here, Hortense!"

Constance had collapsed into a chair.

"E. E.," she gasped, "you are the limit!"

"Well, that's the only way to talk to those gay

Parisiennes, my dear. I bet you those gowns will be here in half an hour. Why, that kid is hustling 'em into the boxes now!"

"Kid! She's fifty if she's a day, and she's fat."

"Never mind. She's human. She's so curious to see what talked to her that she's bringing the gowns up herself."

CHAPTER XXV

FATHER RETURNS

THERE was more than a mere sound of revelry in the Brooke mansion; there was a pandemonium. H. Hedge had at last given a party that exceeded anything within the memory of Constance or Billy. What it cost, the young Brookes had not the least idea, although the probable magnitude of the expense stunned and a little startled Constance.

As for Hedge, he had no more notion of the cost than they, and did not care. Perhaps he had wiped out all the savings effected by scientific management; he rather hoped he had. He was certain he would never exactly know, because the records of his administration were in ashes.

There had never been so much and such beautiful music, it seemed to the guests of the Brookes. There had never been such a supper. As for flowers, the house seemed literally to be built out of them. And, to add the last touch of magnificence, particularly in the eyes of H. Hedge, Constance wore the kind of gown that only comes once in a lifetime.

It was nearly midnight when a commotion in the front hall sent Hedge scurrying out to investigate. He returned in five minutes, grinning. Constance questioned him with her eyes.

"Just an old gentleman who is slightly out of his head," he explained. "He managed to make his way past the man at the door, and he won't go. He seems to have an idea he belongs here, and he became rather noisy when they tried to eject him."

"The poor thing!" said Constance sympathetically. "What did you do?"

"Telephoned for the police. It's the only right thing to do. They'll take care of him; probably send him down to Bellevue for observation."

"Where is he now?"

"A couple of the men are holding him out in the vestibule. He's making a rather embarrassing racket. The funny part is, he keeps on saying he owns the house."

Constance looked at H. Hedge, and her eyes slowly widened.

"What does he look like, E. E.?" she asked in a whisper.

"Oh, he's about medium height, with a short gray beard. He's chunkily built and has a deep voice, with a funny way of making gestures with his hands."

Constance turned white and rose unsteadily to her feet.

"Oh, E. E.," she gasped, "do you know who that man is?"

"You mean the old tad who's trying to break in?"

"It's father!"

Constance rushed from the room, leaving H. Hedge paralyzed in his tracks. It was far ahead of the day set by John W. Brooke for his homecoming. He

propped his shoulders against the wall for a few seconds in order to steady himself while realization became complete.

This was his day of reckoning; this the hour for him to render an account of his stewardship. He made a swift survey of the revelers about him and of the glories that had been achieved by dollars. Then, setting his shoulders stiffly, he followed Constance into the hall. He found her hugging the lunatic.

"What in Sam Hill has struck this place?" demanded John W. Brooke, after submitting to the enthusiastic salutations of his daughter. "Who are these servants here? What do they mean by throwing me out of my own house?"

"They didn't know you, father," said Constance soothingly.

"But what are they doing here? And who are all these people?"

"We're giving a party, father dear."

"A party! What for?"

"Why—just for fun," faltered Constance.

Mr. Brooke surveyed the unexampled richness of his environment and fastened a steely blue glance upon his daughter.

"So, it's a party, is it? That's a fine way to welcome your father home—lugging several hundred people into my house with a strange gang of servants!"

"But, father, dear, we didn't expect you. Not for ever so long. You see, it's nowhere near the 19th of February. It's only a little after New Year's."

Constance was infinitely more nervous than was her wont, even with John W. Brooke in a tantrum.

"So!" he barked. "Just because I come home unexpectedly I catch you at it, do I? And you call this a party! I call it a riot."

Constance cast a nervous glance at H. Hedge, who was a pace in the background.

"Do you know what they did to me?" demanded Mr. Brooke. "They led me into the library, before I knew what was happening, and some flossy little pony in a pink dress tried to get me to dance. *Me!* And when I told them I was boss here they sent for a couple of strong-arms and tried to pitch me out of my own house."

John W. Brooke, still garbed in hat and overcoat, paused, panting.

"Where's Alice?" he demanded. "In bed?"

Constance shook her head faintly. Alice was dancing somewhere, reveling in new-found liberty.

"Where's Bill?"

"Oh, here's around somewhere. Shall I call him?"

Mr. Brooke made a gesture of disgust.

"None of my children at the door to meet me," he declaimed angrily. "Nobody but a pack of strangers—and a party!"

"You're looking awfully well, father," said Constance soothingly. "You look younger."

"Cut it out!" he commanded peremptorily. "I've heard that stuff before. I *don't* look awfully well, and I'm *not* younger. Do you hear? I'm older, by several weeks. And I feel sick."

"Father!"

"Sick of all this tomfoolery, I mean. I came back, looking for a quiet life, and I might as well have butted into a Coney Island *mardi gras.*"

H. Hedge stepped forward.

"Please consider that the party is in honor of your homecoming," he said. "A sort of house-warming."

John W. Brooke turned a baleful glare in the direction of the speaker. He placed his hands on his hips, spread his legs wide apart, and studied H. Hedge from head to feet.

"Who in blazes are you?" he demanded.

"This is Mr. Hedge, father," said Constance hurriedly.

"Hedge? Why, that's the upstart who ordered these flunkies to throw me out!"

"Just a part of the surprise, Mr. Brooke," observed H. Hedge with a winning smile. "Of course we didn't really mean it, you know."

The smile was lost upon the owner of the mansion.

"Oh, you didn't mean it!" he echoed savagely. "Well, you wait till I get hold of the police and you'll find out whether *I* mean something. By jingo, there's a couple of cops now!"

Two men in uniform had entered the hall.

"Where's the nut?" asked the foremost. "Somebody 'phoned they had an old party with an empty attic."

H. Hedge stepped quickly forward and whispered to the officer.

"Escaped, eh?" said the policeman. "Which way did he go?"

"Ran north a block, and then around the corner," answered Hedge briskly. "You may get him if you hurry."

The two officers were retreating, when Mr. Brooke broke loose from his daughter's grasp and ran after them.

"Hey!" he cried. "If you're looking for a nut, here's one."

He pointed to H. Hedge.

"Lock him up!" he cried. "He tried to throw me out of my own house. Maybe he's a burglar, too."

Constance interceded hurriedly.

"Father! Now, don't make a scene about things. You don't understand at all. Send those officers away and then let me explain."

"I don't intend to have that man in my house one minute longer," stormed Mr. Brooke. "And I'm going to clear out the whole crowd, too."

"S-sh—*father!* Officers, please go away. I am Miss Brooke, and everything is all right. My father doesn't understand the situation yet."

"You *bet* I don't!"

"Come, father, we're going into the library to have a talk."

"The library's full of maniacs dancing," bellowed John W. Brooke.

"Then we'll go upstairs in your rooms. Come now, like a dear old daddy."

Mr. Brooke suffered himself to be led upstairs,

and the policemen, at a peremptory sign from H. Hedge, departed.

The sitting-room of John W. Brooke presented a normal appearance to his eyes, but when he stepped into the bedroom he stopped short.

"Who owns those pants?" he demanded, pointing to a garment hanging over the back of a chair. "Not mine. Who owns those neckties? Those are not my hair-brushes. What the devil, Connie—"

Constance, who had been following, hesitated.

"And say, where's the man in charge of this house?" demanded her father, suddenly remembering.

"I'm the man," said the voice of H. Hedge, who had also followed upstairs. Brooke wheeled upon him with a bellow.

"You!"

"That is, I was until this morning. I sent in my resignation."

H. Hedge was calm and still smiling.

"You want me to understand that *you're* the man sent here by the Economy and Efficiency people?"

"There are my credentials. You signed them," said Hedge, placidly, exhibiting the document.

Mr. Brooke swallowed once or twice as he glared at the paper.

"And is *this* the way you've been running my house?"

"No; not the way I did run it. But, as I said, I quit running it this morning; that is, running it on that plan."

"Are you running this shindig downstairs?" inquired Mr. Brooke ominously.

"I was—for a time. But it's running itself very nicely now."

"He ran the house beautifully, father," said Constance nervously. "Truly."

H. Hedge grinned at her.

"Well, by the eternal!" exploded John W. Brooke. "I hired a man to run this house on the basis of economy, and I got a guarantee with it. And I come home to find myself insulted and thrown out, with a lot of strange servants on the place and my money being spent as if I was the government treasury. Where do I come in? What does it all mean? That's what I want to know. Who authorized this blowout?"

"Oh, I authorized it," said H. Hedge promptly. "And organized it. It's a sort of double-barreled affair, you see. On one hand, it's a surprise party for you, sir."

"And that's no lie!" boomed Mr. Brooke.

"On the other hand, it celebrates the announcement of your daughter's engagement."

John W. Brooke turned purple and whirled upon his daughter.

"Engagement! *You* engaged?"

Constance nodded and blushed.

"Who in blazes to?"

"Me," answered H. Hedge.

"Well, I'll be—"

Mr. Brooke finished the sentence in a fit of choking that alarmed his daughter.

"Engaged," he repeated dully, after he had recovered speech. "My daughter engaged—and to this thing here. Say, let's *all* go down to Bellevue and have our heads examined. Engaged, hey? Well, you're hereby disengaged; and as for you, young man, if you're not out of this house in thirty seconds you'll be disembodied."

H. Hedge made no move to accomplish such a hasty exit. Instead he again smiled benignantly at John W. Brooke.

"Only Connie can disengage us," he observed. "Of course if Connie wants to—"

"Connie doesn't intend to," said the owner of that name, slipping her hand into that of the ex-efficiency man. "Be reasonable, father."

"Yes, be reasonable," advised Hedge.

"*Reasonable!* Great snakes! I find my home a bedlam, my money squandered, myself outraged, my daughter engaged, everything gone stark, staring mad —and I am told 'be reasonable.' It's a fine time to be reasonable, isn't it? Lord Harry, I don't *have* to be reasonable! Who's boss here? I won't be reasonable. I'm going to raise—"

"Father!"

"Well, I am. Don't you make any mistake about that, young woman. Engaged! I'll fix that. I'll fix him, too. And I'll fix his company. I'll hold 'em civilly and criminally responsible."

"You can bust the whole corporation, so far as I'm concerned," said Hedge. "I'm through with it."

"And what do you do for a living now, sir?"

"Nothing—just yet."

"Got any money?"

"Not much."

The head of the Brooke household was again threatened with apoplexy.

"And you expect to marry my daughter! Get out of this room, Connie; I'm going to swear."

"Good advice, Connie," said H. Hedge. "You run away for a little while."

She looked doubtfully at her father and clung to Hedge's arm.

"But, E. E.," she asked anxiously, "what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to stay and have a chat with father. We've got to get acquainted some time."

Constance reached up and kissed her young man.

"Father," she said sternly, "I hold you personally responsible for anything that happens to him."

Saying which, she left the pair together. It was with trepidation that she heard the door closed behind her as she went out into the hall. Constance was in no mood to return to the party.

She was too apprehensive about what might happen to H. Hedge. She crept off to her room and huddled in a chair, listening fearfully for sounds of combat.

Alice came in search of her sister half an hour later.

"What in the world has happened?" she demanded. "And where is E. E.? We've been looking all over for you. Been a quarrel?"

"Father is here!" announced Constance tragically.

"Here? Holy Moses! Where is he?"

"In his rooms—with E. E."

"What—what did he say?"

"You know father. What's the use of asking?"

"What's he going to do?"

"That's what E. E. is trying to find out."

"He's with him?"

Constance nodded uneasily.

Alice took a turn about the room, trying to readjust herself to the new situation. Finally, she patted Constance on the shoulder.

"Don't you worry about E. E., Connie. He isn't as heavy as father, but he's more scientific."

Having delivered this consolation, Alice returned to the party downstairs.

Another half-hour elapsed before Constance was awakened from her gloomy reverie by the appearance of her father, closely followed by H. Hedge. Neither of them had a black eye.

"Connie," demanded John W. Brooke, "are you resolved to marry this man?"

"Yes, father."

"If I forbid you to do so?"

"Yes, daddy dear."

Mr. Brooke drew a deep breath and looked at H. Hedge.

"Doesn't it beat the band how stubborn some people are?" he said. "And she's not twenty-one yet."

He bit off the end of a cigar and fumbled in his pockets for a match.

"I blame you very largely for this, Connie," he

said in a stern voice. "I've been hearing about what happened in this house. It seemed that you three children did all you could to upset the plans I made for you."

"Oh, they were all right," interposed H. Hedge hastily.

"Don't interrupt me, sir. I know as much about it as you do. Of course, I was a fool to think it could be done. But at the very least I didn't expect my own flesh and blood to rise up against me. It's unfilial. I'm disappointed—aggrieved—upset. You've gotten me and yourselves in a hole—but I'm the one that has to pull you all out. You say you've announced this engagement downstairs?"

Constance nodded.

"And still you wonder why the heathen rage. You go and announce it before I ever set eyes on him. Well, what does it mean? I'll tell you: it simply means you've got to go through with it—that's all!"

"Father—you dear!" cried Constance.

"Keep away from me; I'm not through. Yes, the pair of you have to go through with it. When a Brooke makes a promise, it goes. It runs in the family. I wouldn't let you get out of the scrape if you wanted to. There; that's settled.

"Now, here's the next thing. What are you going to live on? This man here shows how much sense he has by throwing up his job at the same time he assumes a financial burden. Yes, you *are* a financial burden, Connie. I ought to know, hadn't I?"

"He thinks he knows the same thing; but, believe

me, he hasn't begun to learn. So it amounts to the fact that my daughter is signed up to marry a man out of work. Well, there's some pride in this family. I can't stand for that. So what do I have to do? Why, I've got to find him a job."

"He—he could find one himself," said Constance proudly.

"Hang it all, that's what he did!" exploded Mr. Brooke. "It seems, after running my business successfully with department heads for a good many years, that I'm in sudden need of a general superintendent. I didn't know it until he told me; but he's one of these wise youths who seem to know everything. Well, he'll wake up some day."

H. Hedge was grinning pleasantly.

"So he's coming down to generally superintend. I wish him joy!"

"Father, you're wonderful!" exclaimed Constance.

"Oh, yes, bouquets for the old man," said Mr. Brooke sarcastically. "After you've made a fool out of him."

"And—how much does he get?" asked Constance cautiously.

"There you go," observed Mr. Brooke with a gesture of despair. "You see what you're against, Hedge. How much does he get? Well, I thought he was going to get six thousand. But it seems that general superintendents get ten. That's something else I've just learned. It's a sort of union scale for general superintendents. I hope he hasn't lied to me about it. Anyhow, I'm going to pay the scale."

"Father—you darling!"

And Constance embraced him.

"I notice I didn't get the hug until I came out with the price," sighed John W. Brooke. "This is a mercenary world, even inside my own house."

"E. E.," said Constance, "don't you think my father is the greatest man in the world?"

"Think so? I can prove it."

"Cut out the diplomatic language," ordered Mr. Brooke. "I know when I'm stung. The pair of you put it over on me. I may have let out a few roars, but you haven't heard me squeal.

"Now, Hedge, or whatever your name is, I wish you'd beat it downstairs and find my son, Billy, and tell him his old man is up here, and for him to come up and get what's coming to him. And chase Horace up, if you can find him, and tell him to get out my dress-suit."

"You're coming down to the party?" cried Constance.

"Haven't I a right to go to a party in my own house?" demanded her father. "I have to pay for it."

H. Hedge seized the daughter of the house, whirled her about the room, kissed her, and departed on his errand.

"Father, dear," said Constance. "I dislike slang, but—isn't he a bird?"

"He's a high-priced bird," grumbled Mr. Brooke.

"Well, you sent him here yourself, father dear. I had nothing to do with it."

John W. Brooke considered his daughter's observation and found unexpected consolation in it.

"Viewing it from that angle, Connie," he said, "I think it is only fair to give me credit for picking a live one."

It was a little later that H. Hedge and Connie met in the lower hall.

"Where were you, E. E.?" she asked. "I haven't seen you for a whole five minutes."

"I just ran down to see how the servants' party was coming on, dear."

"And is it a good party?"

"Giovanni is dancing with Matilda."

Constance whooped.

"And there's something else," added H. Hedge, his face serious.

"What?"

"Promise not to scold?"

Constance eyed him anxiously.

"What is it, E. E.?"

"I have just been kissed," he said solemnly.

"You—who did it?"

"Another woman."

"*E. E.!*"

"And, being a polite person, of course I kissed her."

"Henry Wellington Hedge! Tell me this instant —who was it?"

"Mary."

Constance's laughter pealed through the hall. Then she forced herself into sternness.

"Because it was Mary, I'll overlook it. Did she call you 'darrlin' dear?' I suppose so. But don't get too popular, E. E. Hereafter, when there is any kissing to be done, you come to me!"

"I'm here," said H. Hedge meekly.

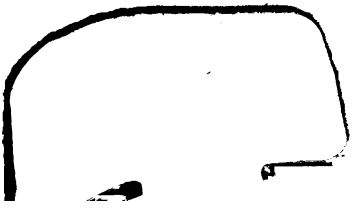
THE END

"The Books You Like to Read
at the Price You Like to Pay"

There Are Two Sides to Everything—

—including the wrapper which covers every Grosset & Dunlap book. When you feel in the mood for a good romance, refer to the carefully selected list of modern fiction comprising most of the successes by prominent writers of the day which is printed on the back of every Grosset & Dunlap book wrapper.

You will find more than five hundred titles to choose from—books for every mood and every taste and every pocketbook.

Don't forget the other side, but in case the wrapper is lost, write to the publishers for a complete catalog.

*There is a Grosset & Dunlap Book
for every mood and for every taste*